Sleep, Sister

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“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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Abstract

This submission is in two parts. The first, an exegesis, sets my creative work in a literary, stylistic and social context. The second and main part of this submission is the first draft of a novel, *Sleep, Sister,* which I have written over the course of the last year.

The exegesis explores issues such as the history of the road novel, alienation and loneliness within society, and in particular within families. It also discusses the novel as a coming of age story, with its main characters being members of Generation X, those born between 1960 -1980. This was the first generation of New Zealand children for whom divorced parents and blended families were common experiences.

The exegesis also describes how the themes of the story have informed the style, narrative and characterisation of the book. It concludes with the main question of the novel; whether the two main characters – sisters – can overcome their damaging past.

The novel is set in New Zealand, predominantly in the year 1987, although there are flashbacks to the girls' 1970s childhood. It is written mainly in the present tense and with shifting points of view.

Exegesis

The Lonely Road Home

By Karen Breen

In his book *Romance of the Road – The Literature of the American Highway (1996),* author Ronald Primeau acknowledges three separate strands to the road narrative; that which reflects the dominant culture, that which reveals residual values of the past, for example a pioneer/frontier mentality and finally, emergent culture.

> *"Typically all three stages operate simultaneously in road narratives which are often at once old fashioned, conventional and revolutionary."*

Primeau expands further on this argument,

> *"In the telling of adventures that may be as available as the nearest set of car keys, the highway mythmaker articulates a cultural consensus about what is real and what matters in society ... at the same time, because life on the road exposes the inadequacies of people and institutions back home, road narratives develop overt counter cultural protest or use the conventional form to subvert present ideologies."*

The seeds of the road story lie in literary genres including the pilgrimage story, such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* from the end of the 14th century as well as the classic Hero's Journey. The dangers, challenges and revelations throughout the Journey are ultimately the making of the Hero and the end destination is as much a state of mind, state of maturity or state of grace as a physical location.

The protagonist in a road story does not necessarily embark on their journey in the name of a noble cause as the Hero does – but both can arrive at self awareness if they travel with courage and an open mind.

The road story has become so much a part of popular culture it is now more commonly experienced as a road movie – a vast film genre spanning everything from the anti-establishment *Easy Rider (1969),* to the feminist revisionism of *Thelma and Louise (1991)* and the dysfunctional family of *Little Miss Sunshine (2006).*

If we retain a focus on literature, one of the great American classics, Mark Twain's

Huckleberry Finn (1884), celebrates the desire to break free from the constraints of where and how one is supposed to live in order to follow one's own path in life. Huck Finn, without family but not without friends, is a hero *because* he leaves and because he defies convention. His desire at the end of the book to *"light out for the Territory ahead of the rest"* underlines his courageous and adventurous spirit.

On their river raft, Huck and Jim create their own mobile home,

> *"other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft."*

What kind of frustrated, disappointed man might this character have grown to become had he not taken to the road and river?

The novel that is perhaps the defining example of the road story genre is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road (1957).* It is also an important work of the Beat era, the American post-war literary, artistic and philosophical movement that embraced sexual freedom, drugs and an anti-establishment worldview. The story tells of the profound impact of Dean Moriarty (based on Kerouac's friend Neal Cassady) on Sal Paradise (Kerouac) and the cross country road trips, in search of adventure and enlightenment, inspired by Sal's hero worship of his free-spirited friend.

A more recent example of the road story is Cormac McCarthy's devastating post apocalyptic novel *The Road (2006),* in which a father and son walk through a ravaged American landscape toward the coast, in search of survival and hope.

My own work, the first draft of a novel entitled *Sleep, Sister,* is also a kind of road story, but the journey is toward a place that can never be reached – the past. It is the past of childhood and the ghosts of childhood. The past, that cannot be re-made, despite an ever-present longing to do so. In a way, it is a road story where the characters are moving in reverse.

This obsession with the past, even an imagined past, leads to a lack of connection to the people and places of the present. The closeknit community made up of extended families is no longer the norm in contemporary western society. Even the nuclear family is a thing in flux, often imploding and reforming as the new blended family. Our extreme mobility, our freedom to move, to hit the road - whether it be a departure from a city, country, marriage or family – is perhaps both a cause and a symptom of rootlessness.

At the same time, it does not follow that staying put is necessarily good for one's mental health, or that family life and loneliness are oppositional. Many great works of literature have mined this subject, including Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway (1925),* many of Katherine Mansfield's stories, particularly *Prelude (1917)* and *At The Bay (1921)* and *Wide Sargasso Sea (1966)* by Jean Rhys.

And it is this psychological journey, with all its dark roads and sharp corners that most interests me, and which has informed many of the decisions I've made in both the narrative, style and characterisation within my own work.

What is it that sets my main characters on their often painful journeys and how are they transformed in the process – if at all? The book is deliberately structured so that the answers to these questions, including that of motivation, are only fully revealed toward the end of the novel. Once that turning point is uncovered - a traumatic event which occurred on a childhood summer holiday and has shaped their lives ever after – what remains to discover, is if and how those characters can escape from the burden of their past.

Because *Sleep Sister* spans childhood to young adulthood it can also be seen in the context of the Bildungsroman – the German term for a novel about a young person's development and growth in maturity. The definitive example of this genre is generally considered to be Goethe's *The Sorrows of the Young Werther (1774).*

However my work differs from the classic Bildungsroman in several ways. Firstly, I have experimented with unity of time. The narrative moves from October 1987 back to the mid 70s childhood years of the two central characters. It then jumps forward to early 1987 when the reader discovers the events of the months leading up to the beginning of the book. Later still through flashback, defining emotional turning points are remembered until finally the reader understands how these characters came to be who they are and where they are.

Another departure from the typical Bildungsroman structure is that this is the story of two young women, rather than a single life story as in the case of notable examples of this genre, such as Jane Austen's *Emma (1816),* Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield (1850)* and Doris Lessing's five volume work *Children of Violence (1952-1969).* Having two central characters has helped me to explore the different ways in which people react to tragedy, guilt and grief. It has also been a useful tool with which to show changing family dynamics, as the balance of power and loyalties shifts over time.

Anne Wilson Schaef discusses the long-term impact that suppressed emotion has on the individual, in her book *Co-Dependence Misunderstood – Mistreated (1986),*

> *"When children grow up in a dishonest, confused family system, their major survival mechanism is to try to figure out what is going on, and then control it. In this kind of family system, you learn to think obsessively."*

Obsessiveness, loneliness, alienation from family and reality – the nature of these subject matters has informed my style of writing in several ways. The book is almost entirely written in the present tense, to support the intensity and immediacy of the narrative. This seems particularly relevant when writing from a child's point of view, and attempting to capture that sense of being fully in the moment and without an adult tendency for retrospection or concern for consequence.

One of the earliest novels to be written in the present tense is John Updike's *Rabbit, Run (1960)* the first of a series of four books chronicling the life of Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom. At the time Updike found the experience of writing in the present tense,

> *“exhilaratingly speedy and free – free of the grammatical bonds of the traditional past tense and of the subtly dead, muffling hand it lays on every action ... In the present tense thought and act exist on one shimmering plane; the writer and reader move in a purged space, on the travelling edge of the future, without vantage of reflection or regret or a seeking of proportion.”*

Updike compared the experience of reading present tense fiction to the experience of watching a film, immersing the viewer in the story as it unfolds. He initially planned to give *Rabbit, Run* the subtitle*, A Movie*. Updike also enjoyed the ease with which writing in the present tense allowed him to

> *“move between minds, between thoughts and objects and events.....there are kinds of poetry, kinds of music you can strike off in the present tense.”*

I have also chosen to write from shifting points of view. The bulk of the book is seen through the eyes of one or other of the two main characters but at key points in the story other characters are given voice. This is a particularly helpful way of revealing how alienated and deluded certain characters have become, and how often they misunderstand each other.

However, it has also been a great challenge to strike the right balance between the advantages and freedom of alternating perspectives with the need to create a coherent voice.

Another structural experimentation is that *Sleep Sister* is not written in standard chapters. There are sections to the book, longer than a typical chapter and themselves broken into smaller sections again. Sometimes these are defined by alternating points of view, at other points it is simply a case of time passing. My hope is that I manage to create a sense of wholeness through the composition of these fragments.

The fragmentation and reconfiguration of the family is hugely important to this coming of age story, set in the first generation of children for whom divorced parents and step-families are common experiences. They are members of what is known as Generation X, those born between 1960 and 1980. In his thesis *The Birth of X Literature: Generation X, Popular Culture* *and American Literature (1999)* Daniel Grassian writes,

> “*X Literature is most heavily dependent on popular culture (i.e television, movies and music) which have become “texts” of equal influence in the contemporary post modern world ...most X writers or characters attempt to use literature and narrative to construct a virtual map of the postmodern cultural world. They endeavour to give an unfragmented shape or structure to their often jumbled postmodern psyches and disjointed personal experiences while questioning contemporary cultural progress.”*

The familial dysfunction within my own work is by no means entirely due to divorce and remarriage but these social factors are a major influence on the emotional and psychological well-being of the characters. In an essay entitled *Parental Guidance Suggested (1994)* American writer Elizabeth Wurtzel, herself displaying the importance of popular culture which Grassian discusses above, has this to say of her generation,

> *“So many of us ... were born into homes that had already fallen apart, fathers on the lam, mothers on the floor, no sense of security and safety, no sense of home at all. So we muddle through our adult lives, kind of dazed, kind of wasted, looking like lost children who are still waiting to be claimed at the security office of the shopping mall.... When Sonic Youth titled its 1989 album Daydream Nation, I think they must*

> *have been referring to this youth cadre of the walking wounded... Sleep is no relief because they are always sort of asleep."*

Interestingly, Updike has said that in part *Rabbit, Run* was a response to Kerouac's *On The Road*.

> *"I resented its apparent instruction to cut loose; Rabbit Run was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the run – the people left behind get hurt."*

Each generation's distress has consequences for the next. In *Sleep Sister,* the pregnancy and subsequent early marriage of the mother is a typical outcome of pre-marital sex for the times (1968). Wurtzel addresses the consequences of such unions,

> *"our parents found themselves stuck between an entrenched belief that children needed to be raised in a traditional household and a new sense that anything was possible ... a lot of already existent unhappy situations were dissolved by people who were not quite young and free (read: childless) enough to start again. And their discontent – their stuck-ness – was played out on their children."*

Perhaps one of the most notable cultural shifts from 1970s New Zealand to the present day, with regard to my story, is the markedly different attitudes to child safety and freedom of movement. In an age when children spent huge amounts of time either on their own or solely in the company of other children, doing largely as they themselves saw fit, childhood really was a world apart.

In this present age of baby monitors, carseats, walking schoolbuses, and supervised playdates, the parents of the 1970s seem flagrantly neglectful. Would it be possible to write an authentic story set in today's anxious parental climate, about middleclass parents on a camping holiday who actively encourage their three children to take off on their own, running wild through bush and beach from morning to night? The same Generation X children who were told to "go out and play" all day, are today busy lavishing sunblock and sunhats on their own highly supervised children.

Another element of the setting which is less obvious and yet still carries significance in the present day is the events of the year in which it is (mostly) set – 1987. A marriage that has focused initially on sexual attraction and subsequently on the acquisition of wealth, starts to unravel at the same time as a catastrophic worldwide stockmarket crash is wiping out fortunes and precipitating recession. For this couple there is a sense that there is still worse to come and that despite weathering a major emotional crisis they may not be able to withstand a financial meltdown.

In 1999 Daniel Grassian wrote of the

> *“revelation of the social and individual effects of a global rampant capitalism based on consumerism.”*

This consumerism is rooted in the predominance of the individual rather than the family, or wider community, or wider world. Thus when the individual is not successful in the prevailing culture, the resulting feelings of isolation and alienation are acute.

Of course the experience of these feelings is not specific to Generation X. In 1964, at a Yale University conference entitled “Socialism in America” Fritz Pappenheim acknowledged that although alienation was by no means new, it had become so widespread that he believed it was a dominant trend in the (then) modern age. He described alienation as a three-part experience; alienation from the self, from others and finally, from the world at large.

> *"The emptiness and meaningless of modern life, the terrible loneliness of the individual, his isolation and drifting ...all of this has been described often enough, not only in sociological works but in such plays as Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and After the Fall, and in works by Tennesse Williams, Salinger, Kerouac, Updike and many others. It has been reflected likewise in some of the basic works on existentialist philosophy which take man, the total stranger, for their central theme and which emphasize that homelessness is man's fate."*

Homelessness is another theme that I explore in my work. There is both literal homelessness, when characters are on the road, and also the lack of feeling at home, within the houses that they live and with the people who surround them. When one character loses his hold on reality through dementia he is put in a Home. As is common with dementia patients, he takes refuge in his childhood memories.

The remembrance of homes past, particularly childhood homes, takes on an almost mythic quality, as if those homes hold the secret to an elusive happiness. Although the childhood described in my book is neither happy nor untroubled, I am interested in my characters' desire to remember it so.

Elizabeth Wurtzel discusses this endless yearning for the unattainable, in *Parental Guidance Suggested (1994)*

> *"Homesickness is just a state of mind for me...I'm always missing someone or some place or something, I'm always trying to get back to some imaginary somewhere. My life has been one long longing ... there's no cure for the strange estrangedness, and if there were, I am sure my body would resist it."*

Within New Zealand literature there is a strong history of this unbelonging, particularly within the post-colonial framework. Alienation is frequently explored in both personal and political contexts for Maori, Pakeha and newer immigrants to this country. An excellent example of this is Keri Hulme's *The Bone People, (1984).* In her essay *The Bone People, Contexts and Reception 1984 2004,* Sarah Shieff writes that the novel is

> *"acclaimed as much for its representation of the pain of unbelonging as for its concluding utopian vision of an achieved – if tenuous – biculturalism."*

She further states that the book proposes that

> *"a physical or spiritual ordeal may be needed to transcend the past and its evils, and obliges readers with a vicarious experience of the results of the alienation and disenfranchisement experienced by the subjects of colonialism – both Maori and Pakeha – and a concluding catharsis.*

However, as Pappenheim points out, alienation is not necessarily subject to the individual's awareness of this state.

> *"The alienated man is frequently a successful man. As long as the success continues it often engenders a certain numbness toward the price the individual is paying ... only in periods of crisis does he become aware of alienation. Societies, too, often do not feel disturbed by forces of alienation. Only in critical phases of their history do they become alert to the problem."*

And it is in such a critical phase, such a moment of crisis in the lives of my characters that I have chosen to explore these two very different experiences of alienation – the conscious and unconscious. The fundamental question *Sleep, Sister* poses, is whether or not these characters can achieve the degree of self awareness that is necessary for them to accept their past and move forward on a healthier journey into the future.

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