

**Part Two: EXEGESIS**  
**SHEDDING SOME LIGHT:**  
**MY CREATIVE PROCESS**

ALEXANDRA SINCLAIR

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## INTRODUCTION

### SYNOPSIS OF ‘THIS ORDINARY LIGHT’

Ella finds herself institutionalised for alcohol dependency and psychological issues relating to her alcohol abuse and past trauma. There she meets Richard, a psychiatrist, who is carrying his own unimaginable grief. As Ella’s treatment unfolds, the boundaries of their respective realities are challenged and the roles of saviour and savee are blurred. At first, Richard is arrogant in his belief that Ella’s case is as mundane as all the others he has dealt with, but as he is increasingly unravelled by the circumstances of his own life, he realises he needs her story to be real.

As C. S. Lewis states in *A Grief Observed*, “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you” (1961, p. 19).

### MOTIVATIONS

The seed for *This Ordinary Light* was first discovered when I came across Persian folktales about the ‘Peri’ – a beautiful but slightly evil supernatural being that descends from fallen angels. Peris have been cast out of paradise and must do penance in order to be allowed re-entry. They exist between the angelic and the human realms, but can operate in both if they so choose (Jensen, 2012). My interest in myth or ‘the magical’ and my fondness for the magical realism genre were primary drivers to write a fictional novel in which this folkloric character is transposed into a modern context. Although tales of the Peri have their origins in ancient Persian mythology and literature, similar mythological characters exist in Islamic culture, and they have also appeared several times in Western culture. Examples of this include the gothic novel *Vathek* by William Thomas Beckford (1782), Thomas Moore’s poem *Paradise and the Peri* (1817), French composer Paul Dukas’ ballet *La Peri* (1912) and novel *Zariel's Doom* by Joseph Robert Lewis

(2014). I was particularly drawn to Moore's poem and have therefore used this as a platform on which to base my 'Peri' character's memories.

## INFLUENCES

I am drawn to the idea of 'an unreliable narrator' and decided to use the Peri as such, in a first person point of view. However, I also like texts that switch between either tandem or multiple points of view. Examples of this that have influenced my work are Michelle Lovric's *The Book of Human Skin* (2010), Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) and Paula Hawkins' *The Girl On the Train* (2015). In the latter two examples, the unreliable narrators and the shifts in point of view are used to confuse the boundaries of reality. I also wanted to explore these boundaries of perception, particularly in regard to the magical and what is and isn't possible. Furthermore, I wanted to write a narrative from inside a disturbed emotional and psychological space and to attempt to structure a story to affect that disturbance.

I am interested in the construct of the 'hierarchy of mental health' – the idea that each of us hold a certain position on what is essentially a sliding scale, and that our positions on it are fluid and subject to change, depending on our circumstances. Therefore, I decided to place the Peri in a context where she is perceived as delusional, so that I could include ideas surrounding mental illness, the supernatural world and our individual coping mechanisms that we rely on when confronted with extenuating circumstances, such as grief. The emerging story had its roots in the magical realism genre and, as such, further examples of reading that influenced my writing stylistically and thematically are: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Gabriel García Márquez, 1967), *The Girl With Glass Feet* (Ali Shaw, 2009), *The Bone Clocks* (David Mitchell, 2014), *The Little Stranger* (Sarah Waters, 2009), *The Snow Child* (Eowyn Ivey, 2012), *This House is Haunted* (John Boyne, 2013), *The Gargoyle* (Andrew Davidson, 2008), *The Girl Below* (Bianca Zander, 2012), and *A Year of Marvellous Ways* (Sarah Winman, 2015).

As I developed the backdrop of both Ella's and Richard's lives, I found that my research expanded to include articles on psychological and neurological disorders and also became focused on books dealing with grief and loss.

The deeper I delved into the subjects of myth, magical realism, grief, madness, loss and substance abuse, the boundaries that separated them became less defined and often appeared to be overlapping, shadowing each other.

Ultimately, I am interested in stories that reveal to us that, often, what we think is the most personal is, in fact, the most universal – stories that explore what it is to be human and the frailty that that entails. What I didn't expect was that some aspects of the story became autobiographical. Although I have led an adult life entirely different from Ella's, a lot of her childhood and teenage experiences are my own. American writer James Baldwin said:

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive. (Baldwin, as cited by Howard, 1963, p. 89)

Consequently, the universality of our stories, the definitions of what it is to be considered psychologically stable, the unpredictability of grief and the stories or myths that we tell ourselves in order to survive, have all been major influences in writing *This Ordinary Light*.

Campbell (1988) observed that myths are public dreams and dreams are private myths and that, "if your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of society, you're in good accord with your group. If it isn't, you've got an adventure in the dark forest ahead of you" (p. 48). This is particularly pertinent to Ella's journey, during which she is often misunderstood and alone.

## **GENRE – MAGICAL REALISM**

Faris says that, "very briefly defined, magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvellous seems to grow organically within the ordinary blurring the distinction between them" (2004, p. 1).

Since the 1980s, 'magical realism' has become a popular term referring to the narrative mode that offers a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality (Bowers,

2004). However, although this genre has become increasingly popular with the reading public, there also seems to be an equally increased concern, from both writers and critics, that “the terms are being reduced to vague clichés” (Bower, 2004, p. 14).

Magical realism has been important as a mode of expression worldwide, especially in postcolonial cultures. Due to its capacity to bridge different worlds, it has served as an effective decolonising agent, thus providing ground for marginal voices (Faris, 2004). Authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie have especially made this aspect of the genre pertinent to late twentieth-century literature. However, Faris argues that this process is not limited to postcolonial situations (2004). During the first draft of *This Ordinary Light*, when I began to explore the possibility of Ella being a mythical creature – and thus using the narrative to merge different realms of reality – these definitions and parameters provided by Faris started to shape the context of the creative work. I have used magical realism to provide this ‘ground’ for Ella’s marginalised voice that Faris talks about. The notion of decolonisation does not come into play as such, but Ella’s voice has instead been marginalised by the culturally induced hierarchy or definition of what it is to be ‘normal’ or mentally ‘healthy’.

The use of both Ella (and the ‘angelic aspect’ of her psyche) and Richard as unreliable narrators (and the multiple first person points of view) in *This Ordinary Light*, allow the reader to focus on the inner landscapes of the protagonists. As Ella’s and Richard’s perceptions of their own beliefs and realities shift, the reader is also challenged to make this shift and reassess the boundaries of his or her own understanding or acceptance of what is real. The distinction between the magical and the real is broken down and the narrative mode becomes disruptive to the establishment of these boundaries. Zamora and Faris (1995) consider that:

Magical realism is a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds—in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism. (1995, p. 5)

*This Ordinary Light* utilises the paradoxes of magical realism by maintaining its narrative in the real world setting, whilst still allowing the convergence of the mythical though Ella's insistence to allow part of her psyche to exist in the magical domain of her own perceived reality. Ella's conviction in her own myth slowly enters Richard's reality, which is dominated by the inevitable death of his daughter and the unfolding of his grief. Consequently they each create a new perception of their respective worlds in order to cope with the circumstances pertaining to their own lives.

Chanady argues that the magical realist narrative mode relies upon an "absence of obvious judgements about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed by the characters in the text" (1985, p. 30).

I agree that the reader must adopt this stance of being free of 'obvious judgements' as noted above, but that it is also the writer's responsibility to deliver the 'fantastical' aspect of the narrative in a way that is consistent with the aspects of the story that are based in a more readily acceptable realm of reality. Although initially the 'angelic voice' in *This Ordinary Light* is distinctly different and more poetic than that of the other protagonists, I have tried to 'normalise' it as the novel unfolds and to make it consistent with that of the other narrators. This is also an attempt to draw the Peri from its origins (vis-à-vis Moore's poem) into the modern context of the novel.

It is through the mechanism of multiple and alternating points of view that the extent to which one's acceptance of what is 'real' can be continuously undermined (by the existence of the other, more magical, version of events) is highlighted. This also subscribes to Bowers view that:

One of the unique features of magical realism is its reliance upon the reader to follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level. It relies upon the full acceptance of the veracity of the fiction during the reading experience, no matter how different this perspective may be to the reader's non-reading opinions and judgements. (2004, pp. 16–17)

She goes on to say, "'magical realism' which, of all the terms has had the most critical consideration, relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings" (Bowers, 2004, p. 3).

It is my understanding that it is this matter-of-fact, realist tone and the fact that magical elements or events are interwoven into the ordinary that separates the magical realism genre from that of science fiction or fantasy. My interests lie more in

the ‘magical’ interlaced in the everyday, rather than the creation of a completely different reality.

That said, I also wanted to create space for readers to draw their own conclusions. By setting the narrative in a mental health facility, it was my intention to allow the reader to believe the magical or mythical aspects of the story, or not. Ella’s state of mind is constantly in question throughout the text and as time and the point of view shifts, so can the reader’s belief. When I first began to write, in my mind Ella was *absolutely* an ancient, mythical creature placed into a modern setting. However, as the story progressed, my own belief in her story waivered. I intentionally created ‘out-clauses’ along the way. It was only in the second draft that I decided that I would cement the mythical aspect to reality in the story. I hope that the reader has the same freedom to allow their belief to shift back and forth. These ‘out-clauses’ were presented within the boundaries of perception and theory pertaining to mental health and the circumstances surrounding each of the characters’ individual responses to loss and their processing of grief. Similarly, in *A Year of Marvellous Ways* (Winman, 2015), Drake observes the protagonist’s behaviour and is free to conclude that she is just a crazy old woman. Of her tendency to talk to herself, he says, “That’s probably what happens when there’s been nobody around but dead saints for company” (p. 130). The reader is free to believe this as well, or they can choose to believe that her stories are real and that she is, in fact, a mermaid.

## THE EXPLORATION OF GRIEF IN LITERATURE

In *A Year of Marvellous Ways*, Winman also uses magical realism to point out the depths of human sorrow and to allude to the ‘madness’ that this may elicit. In one passage, the character of ‘The Doctor’ remembers:

I told her she could die if she didn’t go and live somewhere dry and stop her daily swim. I swim because I have to, that’s what she said. It’s what keeps me well. And I said, Can’t you just swim in the morning? And she said I swim at high tide. It’s who I am. My mother is a mermaid. Blame the moon. I’d never met anyone who talked the way she talked. Who saw the world the way she saw it. And I was transfixed, if not professionally curious, as well. I saw her every day for two weeks. And every day she told me about her life and the

river. Took me into the boathouse and told me the story of her mother and father. And on the last day I took out my stethoscope and listened to her breathing. There was no pneumonia, no hysteria. Just the sound of deep sorrow. It was the first time I had ever made such a diagnosis. Melancholia. That's the term the Victorians used. Grief. Depression. Unassailable loss, choose what you will, but I too understand the madness that ensues when someone you love dies. (Winman, 2015, p. 177)

Although the fact that Ella is also suffering from grief (as well as Richard) is only revealed in the later half of *This Ordinary Light*, there is a thread in Ella's narrative that continuously offers glimpses of her deep hurt and sorrow. However, the true nature and cause of this is only fully revealed through the 'angel' narrative.

As I further researched the representation or discussion of grief in literature, Didion's works on the subject were impossible to ignore. *My Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* are reflections on her husband's and her daughter's deaths respectively. She says:

Grief, when it comes, is nothing like we expect it to be. [...] Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life. (Didion, 2005, pp. 26–27)

Didion's meditations on grief are concise and her ability to describe the loss of her daughter by rethinking the limits of everyday practicalities is poignant:

In fact I no longer value this kind of memento. I no longer want reminders of what was, what got broken, what got lost, what got wasted. There was a period, a long period, dating from my childhood until quite recently, when I thought I did. A period during which I believed that I could keep people fully present, keep them with me, by preserving their mementos, their "things," their totems. The detritus of this misplaced belief now fills the drawers and closets of my apartment in New York [...] In theory these mementos serve to bring back the moment. In fact they serve only to make clear how inadequately I appreciated the moment when it was here. (Didion, 2011, pp. 41–42)

Similarly, in a state of bereavement after his wife's death, Lewis questions the limits of his faith. In his desperation, he realises that the beliefs that he once held dear, are no longer real to him.

If my house has collapsed at one blow that is because it was a house of cards. The faith which 'took these things into account' was not faith but imagination [...] it has been an imaginary faith playing with innocuous counters labelled 'Illness', 'Pain', 'Death' and 'Loneliness'. I thought I trusted the rope until it



mattered to me whether it would bear me. Now it matters, and I find I didn't. (Lewis, 1961, p. 30)

As Richard's daughter's life comes to an end, his mental state unravels. He too begins to question his beliefs and the boundaries of what matters to him. He says:

I would be reminded of my wife's ability to believe, to hope, to have faith. There have been moments when jealousy seemed to reach into my lungs and steal my breath. I had placed all my money on science and there, alone in the dark, it left me fighting for air. (*This Ordinary Light*, p. 74)

He eventually realises that he needs to believe Ella's story. He too turns to '*magical thinking*' in a desperate attempt to change the inevitable course of events. According to Mellor (as cited by Riegel, 2003), mourning is a condition whereby an individual, in a response to a death or a serious loss, suffers the "shattering of a sense of ontological security" and that a mourning individual will call into question "the meaningfulness and reality of the social frameworks in which they participate" (p. 68).

Maureen, the wife of protagonist Harold in *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, also turns to '*magical thinking*' in order to cope with the death of her only child. She refuses to acknowledge that David is dead and often speaks to him: "She paused, afraid she had offended David because he wasn't replying. 'I love you,' she said. Her words trickled to nothing and still he did not speak. 'I should let you go,' she said at last" (Joyce, 2012, p. 208). It is not until much later in the book that the reader discovers that David is, in fact, dead and Harold explains Maureen's behaviour: "She began talking to him. He was with her, she said. She was always waiting for him. [...] She can't let him be dead and I understand that. It is too much for a mother to bear" (p. 318).

As Richard descends further into despair, his actions become those of a man whose normal social and personal frameworks no longer apply. He is desperate enough to want to believe in miracles. He behaves in a manner that is out of character and reckless. He drinks and abuses prescription drugs in order to "un-feel what I feel, un-know what I know" (*This Ordinary Light*, p. 120).

In her memoir, Rapp (2013) describes her and her husband's experience of her son's terminal diagnosis and her re-evaluations of everything she thought parenting might be. She becomes a parent without a future. "I took Xanax, and I

thought of taking more Xanax, the whole bottle just to escape. I drank one glass of wine and then another. Everything in me wanted to look away, to disappear” (2013, p. 48).

The ache of dealing with a terminally ill child and the inevitable loss of that child are severe. I had already written Anna’s chapters before I read Rapp’s memoir, but was reassured that I had captured Anna’s feelings as well as I had, and that they resonated with truth.

As a family suffers the death of a child, displaced blame and anger can ensue. Both of the parents experience the child’s death simultaneously, and are therefore unable to rely upon, or to offer comfort to, the other (Dick et al., 1988).

Of her marriage, Rapp says, “We didn’t know what to do, how to be with each other, with ourselves; we couldn’t think of a thing to say” (2013, p. 42).

Joyce (2012) also addresses the fallout in a marriage after a child’s death; “There was anger for a while, and there was something else, that was like silence but had an energy and violence of it’s own” (p. 66).

This sense of retreat is described in Richard and Anna’s marriage in *This Ordinary Light*. Anna muses, “In *his* life, I correct myself in my mind. Our lives have become two separate things. The distance between us was stretching like a band of elastic. It will eventually have to snap” (p. 99).

Whilst explaining his motivation behind writing *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, Porter says that he became fascinated with what it would be like if, “in a particular moment of extreme trauma the thing one is obsessed with, came alive” (Porter, as cited by Listi, 2016). Porter’s nameless protagonist, a Ted Hughes scholar, experiences this extreme trauma when his wife dies – her death is very sudden and unexpected. His grief takes the form of a supernatural crow that visits and stays for a while. The crow has the ability to speak to the protagonist, and says, “*I won’t leave until you don’t need me anymore*” (2015, p. 7). Similarly, in *This Ordinary Light*, it can be surmised that Ella’s grief has also taken on the form of a magical being. The need to resort to something magical is understandable, to break the rules and bend reality in order to cope with extreme psychological and emotional stress. Grief is unpredictable and, as Ella tells Richard, “We all believe what we need to believe when the time comes” (*This Ordinary Light*, p. 68).

The short story *Wheat* (Slaughter, 2004) also describes the grief that ensues from losing a child. The narrative and the portrayal of grief rely on dream-like shifts

in time – moving from the real, to the remembered, to the dreamt and back again. The narrator says, “So I follow the detail back, to the piece of the day I can stand going into” (p. 1). Of the idea that there are no words for grief she says, “outside of language the memory still comes. It comes to the body [...] the body can’t *decide* to forget” (p. 1). In *This Ordinary Light*, this idea of carrying memory in the body when words fail us is reflected in Anna’s character noting her daughter’s body curled into her own:

I pull her back against my chest and kiss the top of her head and inhale. I rub my cheek against her hair. The shape of her body against mine, the smell of her, the sound of her breathing. It’s like I’m making a checklist in my mind. *Things I will remember*. (p. 118)

## MADNESS OR MYTH?

I wanted to write a story that explored the “intertwined pathways of myths, stories and psychology” (Vogler, 2007, p. xxvii); one that resonated with a sense of universality by paying direct homage to the myths that used to feature much more heavily in the human psyche than they do today. Vogler says that these patterns of mythology are more hidden in today’s secular society but that, “all stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and movies” (2007, p. xxvii). He also suggests that our collective mythology can serve as an “accurate map of the territory one must travel to become...a human being (2007, p. 293). In the opening chapter of *This Ordinary Light*, the Peri watches as a woman curls her body around that of her dying lover. This image is repeated near the end of the story, when Richard and Anna take turns in curling their bodies around that of their child. I wanted to convey the sense that our stories or human experiences (in this case, loss and grief) remain fundamentally the same, no matter the time or place or the particular context. Myth can provide a universal framework within which our personal stories can be constructed and understood. Looking to myth for meaning can provide comfort and self-protection. Armstrong says that:

Human beings have always been mythmakers. The most powerful myths are about extremity; they force us to go beyond our experience. There are moments when we all, in one way or another, have to go to a place that we have never seen, and do what we have never done before. Myth is about the unknown; it is about that for which we initially have no words. Myth therefore looks into the heart of a great silence. (2005, pp. 3–4)

It is this concept about myth that I wanted to convey through Richard's character. He is entering a place he has never seen (the landscape of grief) and when his faith in science fails him, he turns to the myth that Ella has offered him, in order to at least withstand what is happening, if not change it. If the reader chooses to believe that Ella's story is based in fantasy rather than reality, it can be deduced that she, on the other hand, has constructed her own myth. Metzger (1992) says that traditionally, children were told myths and fairy stories *before* they were exposed to personal stories and that this would, "create a context through which the child can later organise and understand his or her own experience" (p. 134). Ella was starved of maternal attention when she was a child and therefore created her own myth from pictures that she saw in books. She hadn't been 'forearmed' with the framework of myth, and therefore applied this retrospectively to her own story, in order to make sense of her experiences and to make them more bearable. Richard turns to myth in order to deal with the future; Ella uses it to make sense of the past.

As previously stated, I wanted to create 'out-clauses' in Ella's stories, in order to give readers the opportunity to be involved in the search for meaning and to make up their own minds about the validity of Ella's narrative, but also to give Richard something to work with. I wanted to provide sufficient scientific evidence to allow some plausibility to the experiences she described. The setting of the rehabilitation facility allowed for this, in so much as Ella's experience could be discussed from a psychological point of view, which juxtaposed the mythical. My research led to journal articles about Mirror-touch Synesthesia, which provided a scientifically acceptable explanation of Ella's 'powers' that she possesses. Hayasaki says that, "Neuroscientists regard the condition as a state of 'heightened empathic ability'" and that it could be mistaken for "a superpower of sorts, a mystical connection between one person's subjective experience and another's" (2015, p. 1).

In addition to Ella's questionable mental state, she is also dealing with alcohol addiction. She says:

I drank to suppress my true nature. I drank to suppress lifetime after lifetime of memories. I drank to shrug off the burden of knowing what I knew. I drank to forget my failure to find the key to my redemption. I drank to feel ordinary. (*This Ordinary Light*, p. 41)

She has found alcohol to be the only means through which she can suppress her 'angelic' nature. She just wants to be normal, like everyone else and in trying to

do so, she becomes an outsider. Joyce captures this sentiment in *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* when Harold, the protagonist, reflects upon “The inhuman effort it took sometimes to be normal, and a part of things that appeared both easy and everyday. The loneliness of that” (2012, p. 106).

In order to gain understanding of what it feels like to have an uncontrollable alcohol addiction, I found Yuknavitch’s memoir *The Chronology of Water* (2010) not only useful but also fascinating. The chapter titled ‘*Distilled*’ is practically devoid of punctuation and describes eleven years of drinking within the parameters of a dysfunctional relationship. She says, “I didn’t feel anything about myself. It was everything to be filled with such nothing” (p. 176). Furthermore, *A Million Little Pieces* (James Frey, 2003) was particularly graphic in its portrayal of being in a rehabilitation facility and going through withdrawals from alcohol. Whilst attending a group talk on addiction, the character James says, “I start to feel sick. Waves of nausea pulse through me. I get cold [...] I can feel my blood crawling slowly through my heart and I think I’m going to pass out” (p. 48). I also wanted to convey Ella’s discomfort whilst she was experiencing withdrawals from alcohol in a convincing way and I wanted my reader to be inside her head as she experienced this.

## STRUCTURE AND POINT OF VIEW

During the writing process, I became confused by the shifts in time and in point of view and often hit a ‘mental brick wall’ as far as structure was concerned. *This Ordinary Light* relies more heavily on its emotional line rather than its action line and this often proved hard to map out. It was during a Masterclass on meta-structure that I had an epiphanic moment. I finally had a name for the structure that I was attempting to use. I realised that I was following a “multi-protagonist helical structure” that was subject to “metaleptic shifts” (George, 2015) between story worlds (that of Ella’s present day world and the ‘angelic’ story world). It was the mental image of the helical structure, like that of a strand of DNA, that allowed me to see how the narratives intertwined with each other, whilst also looping from the present to the past and back again, and also the points at which they intersected. I decided to write the events that were happening during Ella’s time at ‘*the facility*’ in the present tense, but all memories in the past tense. Vogrin (2003) says the use of

the present tense creates immediacy and, I think, a sense of intimacy, because it shortens the ‘time-distance’ between the character and the reader.

The interior focalisation of the story led to long periods of subjective narrative and this, in turn, would leave the reader immersed in an often ‘*disturbed*’ internal space. The multi-protagonist helical structure allows for the reader to bridge this immersion and instead pull back and look at the characters from a distance, through different eyes. Another benefit to using multiple first person points of view that *The Gotham Writers Workshop* recognises, is that it can allow a reader to draw their own conclusions through hearing each character’s voice directly. This is particularly useful when characters have “strikingly different perspectives” (Vogrin, 2003, p. 83). Of first-person point of view narratives, Diasamidze says:

It is always necessary to pay particular attention to the character that fills that role – to his or her personality; built – in biases, values, and beliefs; and degree of awareness and perceptivity – in order to measure his reliability as a narrator. The first-person point of view has its advantages, however, not the least of which is the marvellous sense of immediacy, credibility, and psychological realism. (2014, p. 162)

Finally, with regard to structure, I decided to include Richard’s ‘hand-written’ notes between certain chapters. These usually directly follow on from one of Ella and Richard’s sessions. Primarily, they serve as a psychological break for the reader, from the internal space of the narrative, but also add clues to the changes in Richard’s perceptions of Ella. McKenzie (2016) uses this text imagery technique in *The Portable Veblen*. She uses the image of a label to emphasise the reality of a character’s controversial medical product being ready for market. This comes as an unwelcome shock to Paul, as he knows that it is yet to gain FDA approval. He believes that it is still in the development/trial phase. The label is presented to Paul and the reader at the same time, as concrete evidence to the contrary (p. 238). In *The Raw Shark Texts*, Hall (2007) also uses text imagery. In this case, the author uses different typographical styles and structures to create pictures that emphasise the character’s fears in a literal way. For example, the protagonist fears that he is being hunted by a ‘virtual’ shark and several pages of the text form a ‘flip-book’ animation of a shark coming toward the reader (pp. 329–375). Hall says that his interest in text imagery predated his writing and that he wanted to explore “the evolution of ideas and language in a visual sense” (Hall, as cited by Monaghan, 2012). Additionally, Irvine (2008) suggests that images replicating text can fortify the narrative.

## INTERTEXTUALITY

Intertextuality is a vast subject, with many theorists such as Saussure, Bakhtin, Kristeva, Barthes and Genette weighing in on the debate. For the purpose of this exegesis, an in-depth exploration and comparison of this theory is not practicable, but I want to briefly discuss my motivations in relation to the term or concept.

It is generally understood and accepted that all literature exists in relation “to other texts in the larger ‘mosaic’ of cultural practices and their expression” (Orr, 2011, p. 1). Klage (2012) proposes that intertextuality refers to the way that texts interact with each other and that texts are in constant ‘conversation’ with other texts. This can often be expressed through direct reference or quotation. It is in this capacity that I have used intertextuality in *This Ordinary Light*, with regard to the inclusion of song lyrics from *Slipped* by The National (2013).

I used the lyrics in the hope that the reader, in their search for meaning, would be curious enough to find the song and listen to it. It’s a sparse atmospheric song in which the voice talks of, “having trouble inside my skin,” trying to keep his “skeletons in,” and the fact that he, “keep[s] coming back here where everything slipped” (Berninger & Dessner, 2013, track 9). For Richard, the night in the bar is his moment when ‘everything slipped’. I think the use of the song lyrics within the text could lend another layer to the reader’s understanding of Richard’s unravelling. The lyrics, “I’ll be [...] a fuck up [...] but I’ll never be anything you ever want me to be,” (2013) echo his feelings in relation to his wife Anna. He considers: “I’m glad to be at work, where I don’t feel that my very existence is a disappointment” (*This Ordinary Light*, p. 42). The lyrics quoted in the text create a link to the song in its entirety, which includes the sentiment that, “I can’t blame you for losing your mind for a little while (so did I)” (2013). This speaks to Richard’s change in his perception of Ella.

However, intertextuality is a far more complex concept than the simple utilisation of quotes from other texts. When examined more closely, Allen (2011) states that ‘intertextuality’ relates to the fact that “works of literature are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature” and that these are “crucial to the meaning of a work of literature” (p. 1).

Orr expands on this with the idea that a text is therefore “a focalising point within this network or system, while a text’s ‘intertextual’ potential and status are derived from its relations with other texts past, present, and future” (2011, p. 1). She goes on to say that intertextuality has the potential to “recuperate texts forgotten or invisible in the global cultural matrix” (p. 1) and cites Bauman (2004) who refers to the “cross-cultural forces of intertextuality, in particular its folkloric, anthropological, and popular dimensions” (2011, p. 1). Clippenger states that:

Intertextuality is a method of reading one text against another that illuminates shared textual and ideological resonances; the assertion that all texts and ideas exist within a fabric of relations. The term “intertextuality” refers to both a method of reading that juxtaposes texts in order to discover points of similarities and differences as well as the belief that all texts and ideas are part and parcel of a fabric of historical, social, ideological, and textual relations. (2001, p. 1)

It was with these aspects of intertextuality in mind that I chose to ‘write back’ to or ‘pay homage’ to Thomas Moore’s poem *Paradise and the Peri*, which is part of the larger body of work *Lalla Rookh* (1817).

As stated earlier, the idea that seeded my creative work was the Persian myth of the Peri. Whilst researching this, I came across Moore’s poem. In a sense, I wanted to take this poem and ‘re-tell’ it. It therefore formed the basis of Ella’s ‘Peri’ memories and, as such, the opening chapter of *This Ordinary Light* is a direct reference to – and quotes – Moore’s work. The poem goes on to form the basis of Richard’s enquiry into Ella’s ‘fantastical’ narrative.

## CONCLUSION

The inspiration to write *This Ordinary Light* largely stemmed from my own interest in mythology, perception, psychology and the unseen, and how we weave these themes into our own stories of ourselves – both individually and collectively. Sometimes this is in order to find meaning in the greater sense, or in the circumstances of our lives; sometimes it is for reasons of self-realisation or even self-protection. Vogler says that people can often “recognise their own problems in the ordeals of the mythic and literary heroes, and are reassured by the stories that give them [...] strategies for survival, success and happiness” (2007, p. xiv).



What really surprised me was the autobiographical nature of the text that revealed itself as I wrote. The writing journey led to an unpicking of my own journey from childhood into adulthood and further into motherhood. At times, I found this extremely confronting and found it hard to continue with certain aspects of the story. I think this feeling also related to the lack of psychological space between my characters and myself.

As the story progressed, I realised it was also about our perceptions surrounding mental health and how easy it is to pass judgement on someone who is viewed as ‘less-than’ the norm. The notion that I wanted to introduce was that, perhaps, those who don’t fit into the norm can also be ‘more-than’ average, as Ella turned out to be. In other words, a perceived lack could actually be a gift. We assume that the struggle to be normal is a journey of improvement, but in Ella’s case, she sought ways in which to become more ordinary.

It was interesting to observe my own belief process in the story and the fact that throughout the writing of *This Ordinary Light*, my belief in Ella’s narrative changed. I started out from the premise that she *was* a Peri, then changed to believing that she was, in fact, delusional, but then finally concluded that her story was real. If my reader can make a similar journey, then I feel I have succeeded to some extent, in my storytelling.

Obviously, *This Ordinary Light* is an incomplete work. In further drafts I would like to include Ella’s father. It’s implied that she was extremely fond of him, but he doesn’t feature in the story beyond her childhood. Initially, in my mind, she had an ‘orphan’ status – I wanted her to be completely alone in her struggle, but now think the inclusion of her father in her life could possibly add further tension in her journey to reconcile the human and angelic parts of her nature. I would also expand the narrative to include more deeply drawn characters at the facility – both staff and patients – in order to enrich the setting. With regard to place, I don’t know if I would change the ‘non-setting’ aspect. I like that the nowhere-ness of the story emphasises the internal nowhere-ness that Ella feels, but also understand that setting can provide an anchor for the reader and that without it, they can become lost. However, I would be mindful to not disturb the ‘psychological space’ that I have created. Finally, expansion would allow me to be more meticulous and subtle in the unfolding of Richard’s shift in belief.

At various points during the writing process I lost faith, not only in Ella's story, but also in the text as a whole. I was overwhelmed with the feeling that the themes in *This Ordinary Light* were too morbid and often too personal, therefore I struggled to continue. I found encouragement in Joyce's words. Of her writing practice, she said "[...] there was a little bit inside me that [...] wouldn't stop believing I should finish, even when I looked at what I wrote and wanted to cry, it seemed so ordinary [...] I wanted to write about the small, the ordinary; the beauty, [...] the sorrow of those things" (2012, p. 1). At times I had to remind myself that I was exploring themes that were a real and necessary part of what it means to be human. I hope my text speaks to this idea.

I love what Kafka wrote about the act of reading – that we should only read books that:

wound or stab us [...] wake us up with a blow on the head [...] that grieve us deeply [...] like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide" and act as "the axe for the frozen sea inside us". (1958, p. 290)

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