The Narrative Possibilities of Humour in Regional Family Memoir: A Creative Writing Exploration in Australian Regional Life-Writing

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Abstract

The creative and exegetical components of this practice-led thesis explore the possibilities afforded by humour when used as a primary mode to represent family, the self, and place. Together, the creative and exegetical components of this thesis seek to offer a counterpoint to the recent trend toward trauma writing in Australian memoir and life-writing scholarship, and explore how humour can be used in ways that do not harm family members, and to reframe (normalise and de-exoticise) the region of north Queensland.

Current life-writing discussions focus heavily on trauma narrative, pointing to the representational challenges and complexities rendered in such narratives of imminent mortality, national crises around migrant and Indigenous experiences, crises of political ideology or personal faith, or in the formation of personal identity (Henke; Rippl et al.; Whitlock). This thesis examines how, in narratives with an absence of these types of trauma, humour can work to drive a life-writing narrative. Furthermore, this thesis explores two primary research questions: the affordances of humour to responsibly represent one's self and family, and the affordances of humour in representing in literature, the regional experience of north Queensland. The use of humour in memoir is explored in both the writing and discussion of *The Ocean is a Liar*, a long-form memoir comprised of interlinked stories depicting my family and childhood growing up on Magnetic Island in north Queensland.

The Ocean is a Liar is the first work of humorous memoir to be set largely on Magnetic Island and in Townsville. It uses humour to interrogate constructs of traditional masculinity and femininity, and modern ideas of identity and belonging within the microcosm of family in the north Queensland region. The characters featured most heavily in the creative work are members of my direct family: my father, mother, brother and me. While the creative work contains a narrative arc, each story stands as a partially self-contained story.

Similarly, the exegetical component of this thesis is a self-reflective discussion of the writing process of *The Ocean is a Liar*, incorporating life-writing and humour theory and scholarship. To this end, the exegesis will include an analysis of three primary Australian texts, Benjamin Law's *The Family Law,* Clive James' *Unreliable Memoirs,* and Thea Astley's 'Ladies Need Only Apply.' These texts have been chosen for analysis because they are humorous Australian engagements with family, place, and region, and therefore provide models for analysis. As such, these texts provide ways for analysing techniques and possibilities for humour to responsibly represent family and the self (Law and James), and the region of north Queensland (Astley).

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The most common question I receive from people I meet is "What's it like to grow up on an island?"

I know the difference between a question for the sake of social conventions and a question borne of genuine interest. The giveaway is usually the "Oh, wow" after I tell them I'm from Magnetic Island. This person really wants to know what growing up on an island was like and I feel bad when I answer "I don't know." I understand this answer is irritating because I have a habit of asking, whenever I meet a tall person, "What's it like to be so tall?"

"I don't know" is always the answer. These two situations are slightly different in that my question is not part of the natural flow of a conversation. I am only asked what it's like to grow up on an island after I have said something to the effect of "Hello, my name is Nicole Crowe and I grew up on Magnetic Island."

I'm willing to bet that no tall person has ever walked up to a stranger at a party and said, "Hello, I am a tall person."

But I genuinely want to know what life is like as a tall person, and am disappointed when the tall person looks down at me and frowns, then crosses to the other side of the party.

The tall person may be hoping to blend in for once. Maybe they are self-conscious about their height and here I am drawing everybody's attention to it. On top of this, the tall person has probably never walked around for a day in the body of a short person and so cannot effectively describe the difference between the lives of the tall and the short.

The second most frequent question asked of me at parties is “What’s it like to have crazy artists for parents?” I rarely have a good answer for this question either and am starting to think I might not be very good at social occasions.

I still don’t really know how to explain what it was like to grow up on an island or have crazy artists for parents. This collection is probably just the long version of that answer.

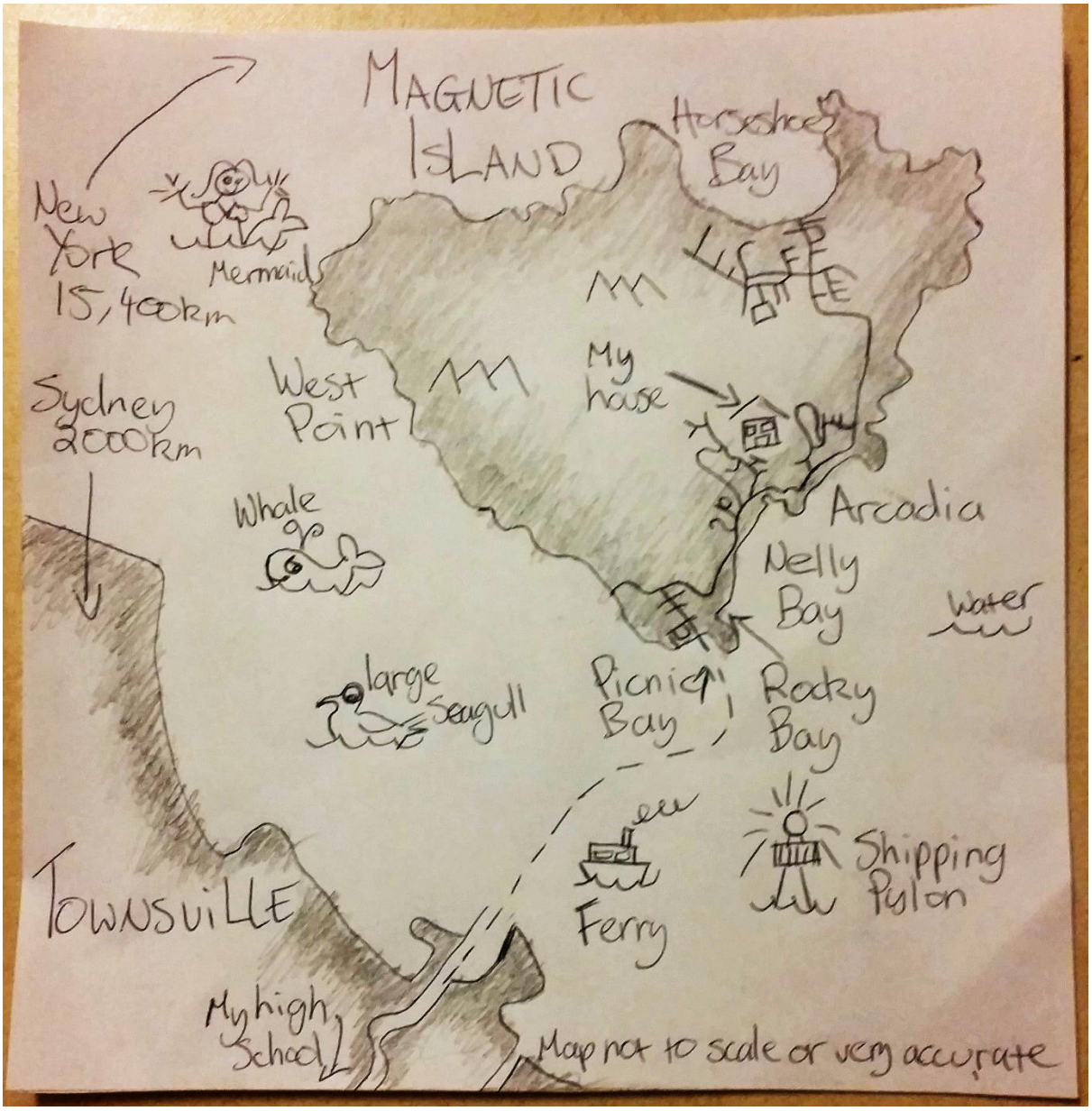

Figure 1: Map of Magnetic Island, 8km from the mainland.

Creative Work Embargoed.
This file contains Exegesis component only.

Exegesis

The Narrative Possibilities of Humour in Regional Family Memoir

Introduction

It was not until my attempts at fiction-writing failed—I have two unpublishable novels under my belt—that I considered writing a memoir. I had spent at least a decade writing what I considered to be serious fiction, because my models had been serious men: Tim Winton, Peter Carey, Christos Tsiolkas, John Steinbeck, Richard Yates, and the controversial Jonathan Franzen, Philip Roth, and Junot Diaz. During this tortuous period I did not stop once to consider these writers critically or question if their methods and approaches were relevant to me and my work. I simply imitated, believing that if I could produce a pale imitation of these works I would naturally succeed as a 'serious writer'. To be a serious writer, I thought, one had to privilege a social or political *message.* One had to also master the *metaphor.* Similes were important. Plots and narratives should be *buried,* not deeply, but just below the surface like a seed one intends to germinate. It is embarrassing for me to see now that for years and years I had labored under the idea that the only way to write well was to write fiction in the way of one of these supposedly great men.

Under this false idea of serious literature I turned out two terrible, derivative novels. I felt let down, by my own blind, uncritical imitation, by what I now perceive as a structural privileging of a man's voice over a woman's, by the fact that I was born a woman and therefore my upbringing and life experience would never enable me to write like a man, by the fact that I was from what I considered to be a falsely reviled and vilified part of Australia and so would have no legitimacy as a writer. I felt like a failure and a fool for wasting so many years on what I had come to consider a futile endeavor. I gave up fiction and, for a

period, writing entirely, believing that my gender and circumstances would forever prevent my work from reaching an audience.

After roughly twelve months of cursing the world and nursing my failure, I decided to try again, that the sunk cost of time was too great for me to give up entirely. But this time I would have to approach writing differently. I would reject social and political messages, I would throw out simile, buried plots and metaphor. In short, I would stop *trying* to write and just write, about what I knew and in a way that came naturally to me; what I knew was my family and what came naturally to me was humour.

Over the years, in conversations with friends and colleagues, I've described events of my childhood and been met with laughter. When I was younger, I'd found these reactions at times baffling and sometimes even offensive. I felt like I was being laughed *at,* that my 'strange' childhood on an island in north Queensland was cause for mockery. Perhaps people were laughing at me (perhaps they still do) but, as the years went by I chose to believe that any laughter stemmed not from mockery but from amusement at the story, and when anyone laughed at something I said, I pretended that had been my aim, that I was deliberately funny and in control of my audience. By the time it came to the first draft of *The Ocean is a Liar,* I had been pretending to know how and why my anecdotes were funny for close to a decade.

So, instead of bad fiction I would write memoir. I had no idea how I was going to go about this and refused to think about it for fear of falling back into the trap of trying too hard and failing again. Furthermore, I would be writing about the people closest to me, something I had not attempted before. In the back of my mind I was aware of humour's potential to harm and mock, and this was the last thing I wanted to do to my family, but for the sake of getting the first draft out, getting words onto paper, I pushed this thought down each time it popped up. I would combat all that later, I thought, deal with representational challenges in the second

draft. My aim with the first draft to unlearn the habits I had picked up in the past, and regain some confidence as a writer.

Less than six months into my memoir project I was invited to present a paper on my (fledgling) work at the Australasian conference for the International Association of Biography and Autobiography (2015, Adelaide). It was at this event that I discovered I was almost entirely alone, among writers and scholars of Australian memoir, in my interest in humour writing and scholarship. From the presentation titles I noticed, on reading the program, that almost every other presenter appeared to be writing and/or studying trauma. Oddly, though, the first keynote speaker was the humour writer and essayist, Benjamin Law, who had been invited to speak about the challenges of turning his humorous memoir, *The Family Law*, into a screenplay which had been just released on SBS. At the end of Law's talk, the floor was opened up to audience Q&A, and a man three rows in front of me raised his hand and made a statement: "I feel that humour is a mask." He carried on with something along the lines of 'people use humour when they want to hide something', but I can't remember his exact wording because I was busy trying to contain a sudden attack of fury. His statement implied that humour is a form of dishonesty, that it is somehow invalid or inferior to other forms of writing. I wanted to jump out of my chair and shout at him, tell him that he was wrong, but didn't have the language for it. Since I'd deliberately cast aside everything I'd ever 'learned' about writing and had only just started hacking out a first draft of something I hoped would someday turn out to be funny, I stayed in my seat and kept my mouth shut. But Law, ever a consummate public speaker, did not miss a beat. He simply smiled and said that he had to politely disagree, that humour actually does a lot of hard work. He said that a writer can use humour to attack social and political structures, expose prejudices, and help enhance the emotional truths of tragedy. He had obviously come up against this attitude before.

I had been shocked and slightly alarmed that Law had been chosen as a keynote, not because the unwritten theme of the conference appeared to be trauma, but because I had been so busy working on my own paper I'd forgotten to look at the conference proceedings in advance. It was not until fifteen minutes before the start of Law's keynote that I picked up a hard copy of the proceedings and saw his name at the top. And my own presentation the following day would be partly on his memoir. I had visions of Law turning up to my presentation and heckling from the back row: "That's not even *close* to what I was doing with that chapter," or "Your reading of the grotesque is flawed and irrelevant to my work. Go back to Magnetic Island, you ignorant red neck."

Praying that he would not be staying for the entire conference, I approached him at morning tea. "So, this is a bit weird," I said. "I don't know if you've read the programme, but tomorrow I'm actually doing a paper on your book. I guess you can come if you want but it might be a bit awkward."

He had been smiling before I opened my mouth. Now his face took on a look of horror. "Oh my *God,*" he said, almost at a whisper. "People are *studying* me?"

"I'm really sorry."

"People are *actually studying* me?" A hand went to his forehead. "I can't believe this. This is *crazy.*" He stared at me a moment longer and then reached into his pocket for his phone. "Excuse me," he said to a woman beside him. "Can you take a photo of us please? This lady here is presenting a *paper* on me tomorrow and I want a picture of us for my Instagram."

It turned out he had to fly home in a few hours and would miss my paper. "I don't know if heaps of people are studying you," I said, trying to sound reassuring. "I think it might just be me. Again, I'm really sorry."

I had chosen to present on Benjamin Law's memoir partly because his work, apart from occupying my interest area of humorous family memoir was also, as far as I could tell, not considered high literature, a form I resented for the many ways I had failed at it. But this conference had made me nervous. I presented the paper I had spent several months working on and afterward almost nobody spoke to me about it. Maybe, I thought, the man who had implied the previous day that humour was a mask, a form of dishonesty, was not alone in his opinion and other people in my audience thought the same but were not willing to admit it. I was worried that Frances De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick might be right when they note that humour, "a traditionally unscholarly topic", might be seen by this audience as "insufficiently worthy of scholarly attention" (xvi). I was looking for confidence as a writer and the reaction (or lack thereof) to my paper came as a blow. During the Q&A part of my panel session I received no questions or comments on my work and felt like almost no one had a clue what I was on about because most of the other delegates were working on and in what I might call 'capital T trauma,' a genre which, as John Paul Eakin observes, underwent an "explosion" in the 1990s, where "victims of all sorts, shedding their inhibitions, claimed a prominent place" (Eakin 3). As Kate Douglas notes, autobiographies of childhood have gained popularity "primarily through their representations of traumatic childhoods—particularly autobiographical depictions of child abuse" (Douglas 3). In response to this, current life-writing discussions focus heavily on trauma narrative, pointing to the representational challenges and complexities rendered in such narratives of imminent mortality, national crises around migrant and Indigenous experiences, crises of political ideology or personal faith, or in the formation of personal identity (Henke; Rippl et al.; Whitlock).

My creative work features no traumas of this kind. I consider my childhood to have been a relatively ordinary and happy one. I suffered no great crisis of mortality, political ideology or identity. The traumas in my creative work are 'lower t', what I would consider

banal: my failure to become an artist or an actor (most people have tried and failed at something), being bullied at high school (many people have been bullied or have witnessed bullying at school). The death of the frog in 'To Have and To Hold' to this day makes me sick with shame but this tragedy is small in the grand scheme of life. Furthermore, my work did not seem to fit into the Australian autobiographical tradition that John Colmer identifies as "the voice of the neglected or misunderstood outsider" (4). I don't believe I felt any more or less neglected or misunderstood than the average young white person in Australia. As a teenager I hated Townsville but this hardly afforded me 'outsider' status because my friends all hated Townsville too, and so this resentment toward my home region is not the driving factor of my work. Looking back, I see that I was, in fact, a geographical outsider and, since moving back to Townsville as an adult, I occupy this space again. Presently I find myself occupying a paradoxical position of being a geographical outsider writing from the perspective of a north Queensland insider, but from a somewhat 'southern outsider' perspective in order to appeal to this southern audience.

Prior to this conference, I was happily pounding out the first draft of my creative work but when I came home I began to question my right to 'memoir', suspecting that my story was not tragic enough, or I had not been neglected or misunderstood enough as a child to be seen as legitimate. It felt too small and trivial. I carried on with the draft because it was my story and it was all I had, but called it memoir with extreme reluctance. Then I met Murray Bail and, for a long time after, dropped the term completely.

In 2017, I was lucky enough to receive an Australian Association of Authors mentorship for emerging writers. With a newly minted first draft, I was excited by the prospect of working with best-selling author Linda Jaivin for the next twelve months as my mentor. In January, I emailed the draft to her in Sydney and it just so happened that in February I would be taking part in a Varuna Writers' Fellowship in the Blue Mountains.

Linda suggested I meet her for lunch in Kings Cross prior to my train journey to Katoomba. All of this sounded wonderful. The meeting went well. We ate excellent sandwiches, and she gave me some great feedback and was enthusiastic about the draft's potential. When we had finished our lunch, Linda offered to walk me back to the train station since I didn't know Sydney well. On the way to the station we ran into her friend, Murray, and Linda introduced me. "This is Nicole, an up-and-coming young writer on her way to *Varuna.*"

I had never seen a picture of Murray Bail and had honestly never heard of him. I have no excuse for this besides the fact that my undergraduate degree was in journalism rather than literature and I am also an irredeemable philistine. Perhaps Murray Bail sensed these qualities in me because I'm sure he didn't smile. What I am sure of is that his gaze was penetrating.

"So," he said. "What do you do?"

"Um," I mumbled. "Memoir."

His gaze became more penetrating. "*You,*" he said, and then, after a long pause, "are writing a *memoir*?" I did not even know who this man was and yet I felt my insides shrink. I knew he was looking at my youth. I was thirty-five, far too young to have lived long and meaningfully enough to justify a memoir. And then, to make a bad situation worse, he wanted to know what I had *done.* In my handbag, I had Linda's written-up copy of my draft and, for lack of any better ideas, I pulled it out and waved it in his face.

"I've *done* this."

The first page was covered in red pen. Absolutely covered in it. And Murray's eyes went straight to it. With one hand, he lifted up his glasses and with the other, ran an index finger across the page. "That's a bad opener," he said as his finger traced the text. "And this paragraph here needs to be cut." Half way down the page he grimaced. "Linda's right. Cut this bit too."

I returned the manuscript to my bag, confused as to why a man I had just met would actually want to read the first page of my draft while standing in the middle of the street in King's Cross.

"Do you know Murray Bail?" Linda asked me when we had bid our farewells and were continuing on to the station.

"No."

"Oh, well, you should read *Eucalyptus.* It's really quite good."

I Googled him on the train to Katoomba, read about his winning the Miles Franklin and the Commonwealth Prize and wanted to die. I tore up the first page of my draft and stuffed it into the train toilet. Murray Bail, one of Australia's most celebrated writers, had made it very clear that he did not think I was qualified to write memoir. For a long time after that, I told people I was writing creative non-fiction[1].

I wish I had had the presence of mind to ask him what he meant by his stare and his dismissal of my attempt at memoir. Was it about my youth or my face or my gender? And with regards to what I had *done,* could I only be seen as legitimate if he had heard of me, if I had already been published and was not just working toward finding my voice and developing my craft? Did I not exist otherwise? I may not have had the perceived authority that can come with advanced age or several published books, but I was banking on a different kind of authority, one in which my birth year and lack of publishing experience were hopefully unimportant. Leigh Gilmore argues that "confession in both its oral and its written forms grants the autobiographer a kind of authority derived from the confessor's proximity to "truth".' (56) My truth was that Magnetic Island existed despite the fact that many people I

[1] This interaction with Murray Bail has been published in *Sudo Journal*, vol. 1, 2019.

had met had not heard of it. There were (are) people and families, multiple generations of them, going about their lives on that island. Magnetic Island is legitimate, as am I, as is the story of my family.

Perhaps, I thought, my youth and my memoir represented everything Bail hates about this "awful era…[this] age of narcissism…All this 'look at me' stuff. People don't read as much, they can't write; you get film stars giving their views on everything" (Wyndham n.p.). Maybe he looked at me and assumed I was writing what Michiko Kakutani, in the *New York Times,* sarcastically calls the "memoir of crisis":

> a genre that has produced a handful of genuinely moving accounts of people struggling with illness and personal disorder but many more ridiculously exhibitionistic monologues that use the word "survivor" (a word once reserved for individuals who had lived through wars or famines or the Holocaust) to describe people coping with weight problems or bad credit. (Kakutani n.p.)

Frivolous. That is what I thought I saw in Bail's stare. He thought I was frivolous, a young woman with zero life experience but with the blind narcissism to write a memoir about her struggles with coffee addiction. If I had known who he was, I would have told him I had used the word memoir out of convenience, that the draft I had pulled out of my handbag and waved in his face had no mention of weight problems, bad credit or coffee addiction; that it was supposed to be a darkly humorous examination of something, life, maybe? I did not really know at that point. It was only a first draft. What I did know was that I absolutely did not intend to write something frivolous and narcissistic. I can hazard a guess that am not alone in this writerly concern verging on paranoid avoidance. I am sure that any writer of memoir would be horrified to find that their work has been written off as narcissism. But how, practically, does one avoid this? I had absolutely no idea.

A little over one year into my memoir project I had what I felt in my bones to be a bad first draft and a hoard of insecurities around my legitimacy as a writer and memoirist from a dinky part of north Queensland: a strange person from the periphery writing in the peripheral mode of humour. Honestly, I felt like quitting the project more than once. I could have quit writing again, pretended that my shame was anger and thrown a middle finger up at what I considered to be 'the establishment'. But shame is not a productive state, and, eventually, my insecurities resolved themselves into research questions: How would I go about using techniques of humour to represent myself and my family in memoir? How would I use humour to represent my region in a way that was familiar and relatable to an outside audience who had never visited north Queensland?

It turns out that these are not easy questions to answer, but the first chapter of this exegesis will discuss the complexities of representing family and self in humorous memoir and in the second chapter I will discuss the challenges and complexities of using humour techniques to represent the largely underrepresented tropical north Queensland life more generally, and in particular, Magnetic Island and Townsville.

Chapter One: Methodology

I am calling this exegesis a work of autoethnography because this term best fits the self-reflective, qualitative approach to the research and creative project. Since a memoir trades in personal narratives, it seemed natural that the exegesis should discuss the personal narratives and practice behind the personal narratives. Jaquelin Allen-Collinson describes autoethnography as:

> The researcher's own personal narratives [which are] "written in," explicitly, upfront, systematically, sometimes poignantly, as a fundamental and integral part of the research, rather than as a subsidiary, confessional "aside". (Allen-Collinson 10)

The autoethnography form suits the creative arts in that the definition above fits neatly within the practice-led research paradigm where the 'researcher's (my own) personal narratives' can be the single-most important driver of the overall project. My overall methodology for this thesis has been guided by what Brad Haseman calls "an enthusiasm for practice" ("A Manifesto for Performative Research" 100) where my own personal narratives, my angst and frustration at trying to make the creative work into something not terrible were the sole reasons I embarked on this project. According to Haseman, practice-led research "commonly place[s] the researcher in the thick of the action, not only observing but also participating in the object of study, the practice, and the theory building that accompanies it" (Haseman "Tightrope Writing: Creative Writing Programs in the RQF Environment").

My process has been rather linear. I started by writing the first draft of the creative work and then turned to research and scholarship to help solve some of the problems and questions that arose out of that first draft. I then used that research to inform parts of a second draft of the creative work. As Haseman advocates, I have used practice as my principal

research activity ("A Manifesto for Performative Research" 103), turning to scholarship as problems and questions arose and as my practice dictated.

As no creative practice operates in a bubble, I have taken the approach of a bricoleur, drawing from a range of aesthetic and material tools, influences and scholarship (Denzin and Lincoln 4). Like Tess Brady, I liken my creative practice journey to that of a bowerbird turning over leaf litter and picking out coloured and shiny things with which to decorate its nest (Brady n.p). I've drawn from life-writing and humour scholarship when I felt my practice dictated it, as well as from several works that have become exemplary texts. On first glance, Benjamin Law's *The Family Law,* Clive James' *Unreliable Memoirs,* and Thea Astley's 'Ladies Need Only Apply' may not look like they belong together. That, indeed, is how I felt when I started this project, that they were works with little in common beyond the fact that I found each striking in some way, to the point where I returned to them at various times during the development of *The Ocean is a Liar.* The beauty and the horror of this thesis journey is that it has forced me to think more closely about my practice, literary influences and the wider literary landscape I work in. Several years ago I would have simply read these works without much thought. In the past I considered my reading taste to bowerbird-like, seemingly random but working toward an end point I was reluctant to define.

There is a bowerbird under the building where my office is located. I often see it hopping about with something in its beak, one time a blue bottle cap and another time a piece of aluminium gum wrapper. Away from its bower, this bird seems incongruous and amusing, so dedicated to the selection and transport of rubbish. It may not even know what it is doing, only that it is driven to preference one particular thing over another. I am sure if I were to ask the bowerbird why it chooses a piece of glass and leaves the chocolate wrapper, it will tell me because it likes the glass better. But the bowerbird is not entirely random. Recently, I found the bird's nest, a sprawling thing covering several square metres of garden bed. In one section

it has arranged the blue objects. Another is scattered with green things. The front entrance is where the shiny silver things live, and the whole arrangement is topped off with several thoughtfully-placed red hibiscus flowers.

The bowerbird might be able to tell me why it decided to place the green and blue things at the back and the silver things in the front (based on the location of the bower, I expect it has something to do with the morning sun catching the silver things and attracting the attention of a passing female). But if I asked the bowerbird why it moved the deflated green balloon from the centre of the green section to the edge, its only answer might be that it felt like the right thing to do. Similarly, in developing this regional, family memoir, I went through a process of partially unlearning taught deference to foreign models and learning to work instinctively, with the material I had to hand.

While my critical-thinking ability may be somewhat more advanced than that of a bowerbird, readers are sure to have questions about the creative work, questions I have not addressed in this exegesis. 'Because it felt like the right thing to do' will likely be my only answer to many of these questions. I am sure this thesis is more revealing than I intend it to be, likely in the wrong ways. Readers will see blind spots and prejudices that I have thoughtlessly revealed about myself. But there are many things I *have* thought about through *The Ocean is a Liar*'s development. I have mined life-writing and humour scholarship for its application to the representation of self, family and place, and I have gone back over and over to my exemplary texts to investigate how and why these works made me read them, and how, explicitly, they might inform my own practice. I have looked at the representation of self and family in the works of James and Law (Chapter two) and the representation of place in Astley (Chapter three), and am now able to discuss them within the context of life-writing debate, humour theory, and my own creative practice. The work of this thesis addresses a significant gap in scholarship around humour in Australian memoir, and my analysis of *The Family Law*

is the first scholarly analysis of any kind of this work. Furthermore, *The Ocean is a Liar* is the first long-form work of humorous family memoir set largely on Magnetic Island and in Townsville.

My family and friends have been aware from the beginning that I have been working on this memoir. While they are not participants in the traditional sense (I conducted no formal interviews and focused primarily on my own experiences and stories), I have undertaken this work as a partly collaborative project. Throughout the whole process, I have sent stories to those featured (the people I am still in touch with and wish to remain friends with), asked for feedback, and given friends and family represented the power of veto over anything they have found offensive or incorrect in their representations. My family has reviewed the thesis and consented to its circulation (Appendix A).

So far, I have not received one single angry or critical reaction from any of the people represented in the memoir. My mother has noted that I have gotten small details wrong, like the size of a camping ground or the time of day an event occurred. That said, I have retained these small errors of fact because I consider these small 'inaccuracies' true to my memories as a child. My father has not been concerned about details at all. As yet, he has expressed no concern about the representation of himself in my work. Occasionally, he will read something with a puzzled expression and say something to the effect of 'I really don't know why you're writing about us', but has so far been pleased with the results. I sometimes find it baffling that my parents do not mind my writing about them, often in a less-than-perfect light, but perhaps they do not mind it because they are artists and understand the role of perspective. Stand my mother and father side-by-side before a palm tree and give them each a canvass: they will each turn out a totally different version of the same scene. This is because my parents also bricoleurs, but with visual art, choosing and experimenting with colours and techniques to suit their own interpretations of their local, familiar scene.

It is through the combination of humour theory, exemplary text analysis, experimentation and seeking feedback that this thesis offers implicit (creative work) and explicit (exegesis) answers to the questions of how a memoir writer can use humour to represent the self and family, and how humour can be used to undercut stereotypes of the north Queensland region.

Chapter Two: The Affordances of Humour in the Representation of Self and Family

As is probably obvious, I brought a lot of neuroses to the first draft of this creative work. I knew less about what I wanted to write than what I *didn't* want to write. 'Narcissistic' was on this list, as was 'frivolous' (Kakutani's observation in the *New York Times* had scared me). I was very confused while writing the first draft and associated 'frivolous' with feminine which, to me at the time, amounted to something like *Eat, Pray, Love*, a woman's journey to self-knowledge and renewal. The book's cover design, with the three words spelled out in pasta, rosary beads, and flowers respectively, screamed 'feminine' and I refused to write the feminine because I had learned – or been taught – to equate this with weakness. There was no personal journey in my first draft. There was no mention of women's problems, no lessons in self-care and no finding love. I did not want to make any political or feminist statements. I refused everything to the extent that I had tried to reject any and all genres. I was determined that my work would not be a bildungsroman, which seemed too close to narcissism for me, and was absolutely determined it would bot not be a künstlerroman (life of the artist narrative) because I was not and would not ever identify as an artist: that was a job for my parents, and one I had often, over the course of my life, watched them defend.

In the late 1990s, the market for T-shirts dried up and so my parents switched to paintings. Someone would approach the stall and my father's refrain was always the same: "Original artwork, local scenes hand painted on Magnetic Island." Most of the time he received a smile and an "Oh, they're beautiful," but sometimes, more than occasionally, someone would reply with "You call this art? *I* could do that." This person would walk away and my father would mutter "Yeah but you didn't, did you?" If I had a dollar for each time I witnessed this interaction take place between my father and a member of the public I might have enough to buy dinner at Townsville's best restaurant. My father might have enough to

buy two meals at this same restaurant. But a good meal can't erase the humiliation at being told that your work does not qualify as art.

While I am loathe to call my work 'art', I could not help but imagine some similar humiliation happening to me as a writer. I imagined Kakutani in the *New York Times*: 'Naive young woman clearly intends debut work to be funny when really she's just throwing her family under the bus.' An associated fear I had was that of making too much of my local, found material – and thus being accused of attempting to 'cash in' on or exploit my family.

While I was afraid of being called a narcissist, I understood on some level that turning the lens on oneself will not necessarily bring about the charge. An awareness of one's own potential for narcissism could be one way of avoiding it, I thought. Or one could claim narcissism with enthusiasm as Clive James does in his memoir, *Unreliable Memoirs*, announcing in the preface that "premature memoirs can only be conceited" (II). The first of his three memoirs, *Unreliable Memoirs* was published when James was forty-one years old, a relatively young age to publish a memoir, especially since this one focuses largely on James' happy childhood in Kogarah, outside of Sydney. By making this declaration, claiming the charge of narcissism, James is essentially neutralising it before it can be used to attack, but in the next line he undercuts this statement by writing, "I have no excuses against this charge, except to say that self-regard is itself a subject, and that to wait until reminiscence is justified by achievement might mean to wait forever" (II).

This sleight of hand is a challenge to the idea that autobiography belongs to those who have overcome great obstacles or hold positions of great political or social power. James' story is not one of tragedy to triumph. Rather than describing a difficult childhood of great obstacles it would seem that the author himself is the obstacle. James positions his childhood self as the fool slipping on the banana peel. Devoid of self-awareness, young James is a stumbling, lurching figure with his mother pulling him out of ditches, and repeatedly stopping

him from killing himself due to his fool-hardy pranks and misbehaviour. A self-described "obtuse" child (18), he goes "around blasting nasturtiums" (16), breaking furniture, and stumbling from catastrophe to catastrophe, keeping his mother in a constant state of stress and worry. What James presents as catastrophes are more aligned with the benign crimes and deviances of a child, but "inflated to Homeric proportions" (342). His school yard fights "looked like the battle of Thermopylae" (32) and, describing a childhood bicycle adventure gone wrong, James writes:

> Hearing my screams, my mother came after me like the back half of Zeno's paradox about Achilles and the tortoise, if you can imagine Achilles in drag and the tortoise screaming its head off while balanced on a shaking bicycle seat with its legs stuck out. (21)

James assumes the role of a modern-day Odysseus, constantly frightening and disappointing his mother who is depicted as an Athena figure. James' mother is never fully fleshed-out as a character. The reader knows nothing of her personality beyond her stoicism and weariness at having to put up with her troublesome son. She remains unnamed in the work, and only speaks in her own voice three times. This points again to the conceit of James' younger self in that he only saw his mother as a two-dimensional saviour figure but also, perhaps, to the older, more sagacious memoirist who does not presume to know his mother's character or motivations through the lens of a boy: that would be the height of narcissism.

At the time of publication, *Unreliable Memoirs* attracted critics. Don Anderson, in *Meanjin*, asks, "[M]ust Antipodean autobiography be hyperbolic?" (341) He wonders "is it to fill a vacancy, doubt, absence? Is it a rhetorical cultural cringe [?]" (342). As I read this line, I was reminded of that first conference I attended, of the man three rows in front of me at Benjamin Law's keynote talk. He had said that he felt that humour is a mask, and implied that humour as a mode is a cover for something more substantial. Anderson, too, implies that

humour, in this case, makes up for a vacancy, doubt or absence. If an Australian cultural cringe does indeed exist, it may be manifest not in the employment of humour and hyperbole, but in the compulsive haste to dismiss it.

James admits that he was driven to entertain from a young age, experimenting in the school ground with "neo-Homeric storytelling activities" (103), positioning himself as the school joker. It would make sense therefore, that James would extend some of this 'joker' quality to his writing about his earlier life. As an adult looking back on his life in this memoir. Perhaps James uses hyperbole not to fill a vacancy, but to reduce this epic canvas to the mundane and, furthermore, to draw attention to the constructed nature of the autobiographical act.

Exaggeration signals to the reader that the author is aware of the conceit intrinsic to the autobiographical act, and its ultimate foolishness as an endeavour: to think that a memoirist can sum up two decades of life in one hundred and seventy-one pages. It is a joke to think one can break down decades of experiences into tidy little headings and chapters. It is a joke to think we really do learn from our mistakes and can then, through memoir, impart wisdom. Through hyperbole, James makes clear that he does not want to look back on the events of his life and upon his former self with the mocking laughter of adult judgement and condescension. The events he describes are often ridiculous and foolish, but so too are his presentations of them. Through hyperbole, he is demonstrating that he, the autobiographer, remains a fool. He is not casting a serious eye upon a past foolish self. He is casting the twinkling of his present foolhardy self upon the past foolish self. He is offering both his past and present selves up to laughter and ridicule, and thus demonstrating the ridiculousness of the autobiographical act. In this way James presents an alternative to tradition of soberly-written autobiographies, and one that upends the traditional progress narrative plotted along a trajectory of tragedy to triumph.

These thoughts on *Unreliable Memoirs* have only come to me recently. The first time I read this work I was writing the first draft of my own memoir, during a time when I was busily avoiding my story altogether. I was writing about my family and other people in my community. I initially regarded *Unreliable Memoirs* as a bildungsroman, a genre I was actively aiming avoid—I enjoyed the self-depreciating humour and the interesting turns of phrase but foregrounding myself in the work was the opposite of what I was trying to do. James was also a man, and one I regarded sceptically as a member of 'the establishment'. On the first reading, my feminist inclinations also led me to disparage him for effectively excluding his mother from the work. If she was such a significant figure in his life, I wondered, why did he not let her speak? *My* characters all got to speak. *I* was representing the people in my life as fully fleshed-out, complex, human beings.

At least, that was what I thought. Because I am almost certainly deaf and blind to myself, it has only very recently dawned on me that almost every writing decision I have made around this thesis has come from some place of deep burning anger, at the borderline Sisyphean effort it takes to make a living as an artist, at having spent so many years trying and failing to write literary fiction, only to switch to memoir and discover that a) my peers and betters in writing and scholarship might consider humour to be inferior to trauma writing and studies, and b) Murray Bail thought I should not even be writing memoir.

Numerous friends and family members over the years have told me about my 'anger issues' but this has always been said in a half-joking way, probably to avoid triggering said 'issues', and it is only in the writing of this exegesis that I see what they have been talking about (this is especially vexing to me since the biggest item on my list of things to reject was writing-as-personal-therapy). I wish this revelation had come to me sooner, ideally around the time I was finishing the first draft of the creative work. On sending the draft to friends and colleagues for review, I was not expecting praise: it was a first draft and I had had enough

writing experience to know that it would require a lot more work and sculpting to bring it to a standard suitable for public consumption. What I did not expect, however, was the reaction I received to my representation of my father.

"I didn't realise you hated your dad so much," was a piece of feedback I received more than once.

"So far, your dad's coming off as a bit of an arsehole," one of my thesis supervisors told me.

I did not intend this reaction from readers. I was disappointed to learn that my first draft, in essence, was not funny, but instead mean, or instead if it was funny that it risked making fun of family members at the expense of self-investigation and self-derision. For a number of years, I have been teaching creative writing and have always highlighted the importance of conflict or tension: "What does your protagonist want and what is getting in their way?" The conflict can be internal or external but the story should be about the protagonist encountering and overcoming some sort of problem. In writing the first draft of the creative work, conflict was about the only element of storytelling I had not banished to the reject pile.

My first reaction to feedback on the draft was defensive: "You obviously don't get what I'm trying to do here" (My affinity for conflict is, evidently, not limited to storytelling). But looking over the comments in detail, I saw that I had in fact been too successful in my rejection of storytelling techniques. My draft had no real plot, buried or otherwise. It had no metaphors or similes. There were no political or feminist messages. A narrative was non existent but was there conflict indeed. The entire work read as one big shouting match between myself and my father. Take the following section, the original opener of what is now the creative work's final story:

It had been a good day for him: the way he pulled into the driveway singing my name made that obvious. I heard him climbing the stairs and barricaded myself in my room.

"Open the door." He tried to turn the knob but I held onto it.

"No. Go away."

"But I've got a present for you."

"I don't like your presents."

I had been refusing his 'presents' for as long as I could remember.

I did not show this draft to my father but I now recognise that if I had he would have found this particular scene amusing and inoffensive. My father and I have always had a banter-driven, mildly antagonistic relationship, likely because we are both strong-willed and stubborn. We rarely get into genuine arguments. During the period when this section was set, my father was supplementing his income as an artist with antique dealing (and thus filling our house with old furniture, Royal Doulton figurines, cuckoo clocks and carnival glass until he could find buyers for it). The more crowded the living room and kitchen became, the more protective I became of the space in my own room because I knew that if I gave a single inch, within days I would find my space overrun with toby jugs. This introduction was designed to set up a tension for the reader, to give them the impression that my father was threatening me. In the next paragraph, I slowly revealed the incongruous actuality: that he wanted to get into my room not to attack me, but to convince me to allow him to store an antique sideboard in the corner. This, I had thought, would generate humour. But my early readers did not think it was funny at all. Clearly, something had gone wrong. This scene did not provide context for my father's actions, which thus came across as disturbing.

The events that had stood out to me in my youth were the extreme ones. (Maybe my anger issues have endowed me with a good memory for conflict). I remember all the ways in which my father got in my way when I was a child and on the page this showed up as

fighting. I had presented myself as trapped in a dysfunctional family when my family has never been particularly dysfunctional to my mind—certainly there were no abuse or substance issues. My parents never separated. We had the ordinary, benign conflicts of an ordinary family for instance. Because I was so focussed on not being the protagonist of my own memoir, so afraid of being labelled a narcissist, the scenes between my father and me (most of the draft's content) were all scenes in which I was reacting to or against him. Reading over that draft I saw that I in actual fact *was* the protagonist but one with no agency. My father had become an antagonist and I had given him too much agency, so much so that he had become a villain, harassing and bullying his daughter. I was horrified that I had produced a draft so far from what I had aimed to achieve. Perhaps James had it right, I thought, in his focussing on himself rather than his family members. Maybe that approach was easier, safer, and kinder at least to his mother. I wondered if I was capable of presenting my family members as complex, well-rounded people at all, but then had to remind myself that what I had on my hands was only a first draft. Mimi Schwartz, American author and memoirist, calls the first draft of a memoir a "childlike oversimplification": the "perfect grandmother", the "hateful sister", the "selfish husband" (35). It takes, she finds, "many drafts over time to help test [her] initial emotions (usually angry, overly enthusiastic, or self-righteous) to see how well those gut responses hold up" (35). Schwartz does not show early memoir drafts to family members, but waits until her one-dimensional figures are fleshed-out and her writing becomes more nuanced so that her "family members keep talking to [her]" (35).

My first draft was an oversimplification in which I had created a dichotomy between victim and villain, and one that was not only unfunny, but lacking empathy for my father. My story needed what author and memoirist Jill Christman refers to as 'intention' (22). Christman's work is very different to mine in that her memoir, *Darkroom: A Family Exposure,* falls into what I would consider to be 'capital T' trauma, revealing her father's

alcoholism and "a whole family leaning toward self-medication of drugs and alcohol…a whole book brimming with abuse and death and drugs and betrayal" (20). While Christman had sought and received cooperation from her family members to write her memoir, she was not necessarily focused on the representation of her family members; rather, she was focused on writing *her* story: "Alone in a room with my computer and I felt perfectly secluded and safe" (19). When her memoir was accepted for publication, she was hit with a panic about its revealing nature. A short time later she received a phone call from her brother: "I've got a bone to pick with you" (20). He was annoyed, but not about any embarrassing or harrowing detail of their childhood. Rather, he complained about a small detail in a scene that took place in a restaurant: their father had accidentally chewed on a band aid and Christman's brother accused her of exaggerating the length of time he chewed it before spitting it out. Christman was shocked that her brother had chosen that particular, rather trivial detail to be angry about (he was apparently fine with her treatment of drugs, death, abuse and betrayal in the family), but puts this down to her story's intention—she had not set out to bring down her family but rather to answer a question for herself, something that was important to her, to art, and her brother had seen that (22).

It was comforting for me to learn that one can reveal all manner of details about family members so long as the author's intention is in the right place and these family members are presented with understanding and compassion. That said, neither Christman nor Schwartz presented any kind of *how to* instructions on how to avoid compromising and offending family members in memoir. They seem to have come to these realisations after the fact, focusing primarily on their own personal stories during the drafting of their memoirs. My problem was that my personal story was absent from the first draft. This, I came to realise, was the number one problem with this draft. I was not owning my story, my part in my family. If I was going to write a memoir then I needed to be the protagonist. The narratives of

the work needed to be driven by my decisions, my intention. Without my story none of my family members could be well rounded, complex and human.

I do not regret the approach I took to the first draft of the creative work. I did what I needed to do to get words on the page. And drafts are supposed to be terrible, otherwise they would not be called drafts. But on reflection and revision I saw that I had unconsciously written myself into what Kenneth Burke calls the tragic frame, one that deals in crime and victimhood (39). The tragic frame sees the world in terms of good vs evil and the actors within it as heroes or villains. I had accidentally written myself into the tragic frame partly because I had not yet figured out my intention for the memoir, and partly because I had focused on conflict alone as a narrative device. Like Schwartz's experience with early drafts, my draft was oversimplified and unfunny, but I had the starting material. The material needed reframing, moving away from the villain-or-victim space and into something more benign, human and foolish. This state is what Burke calls the comic frame,

> …picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. (41)

Burke notes that comedy and tragedy, in dramatic and narrative contexts, share a purpose: warning against the dangers of pride or hubris (42). The difference, however, between the two generic registers is that comedy shifts the focus from crime to folly. The comic frame suggests that unlike in tragedy where people tend towards pure good or pure evil, in comedy all people are flawed. It is flaws, rather than any inherent evilness on the parts of the characters, that leads to tragedy. Burke states that the comic frame is

> "neither wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking—hence it provides the charitable attitude towards people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation, but at the same time maintains our shrewdness concerning the simplicities of 'cashing in'". (166)

Powell argues that the comic frame allows people to "challenge the status quo by a corrective ideology which confronts and demeans the failings of the operating ideology" (87). The end game of the comic frame, Burke states, is that it "should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting.* Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would 'transcend' himself by owning his own foibles" (171).

Let me go back for a moment to that conference delegate at Benjamin Law's keynote address. He commented that he felt that humour is a mask to hide behind, a form of dishonesty. Law responded by advocating for humour's potential to enhance the emotional truths of tragedy, expose prejudices, and to attack social and political structures. I am certain that the conversation went this way because neither of these two men had actually studied humour (Law is a practitioner and if he knows what's good for him he will do well to live by the words of E. B. White, that "humour can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind" (xvii)), but, much like love or mortality, everyone has an opinion on humour because it is part of the universal human condition. I myself felt that Law was right but, having not been blessed with a scientific mind, am grateful to Burke's elucidation of the comic frame, which seems to me to clarify Law's defence of humour. But again we come to the question of how, *how* does one go about implementing humour devices to reframe the tragic and to treat all people represented, especially family members, as full, well-rounded, flawed beings?

Since Law, at that conference, appeared so shocked at the suggestion that I would (*people* would) be studying him, I am going to assume that he wrote his memoir, *The Family*

Law, largely on instinct. I attended the Brisbane launch for this book in 2011, and remember him telling the audience that it was really just a collection of anecdotes about his family, that he had not even considered writing a memoir until someone in the publishing industry suggested he do so.

Law may not have been aware that he was working within the comic frame when he was writing *The Family Law*, but I argue that it is Law's treatment of his family and himself through his application of humour and the comic frame that has enabled him to present them a complex, flawed but ultimately relatable human beings in order to point out prejudice. Yes, there are tragedies in his memoir (his parent's divorce, his mother's miscarriage) but through Law's implementation of the comic frame, there are no villains or victims.

Earlier, I discussed Christman's idea of intention, or central question (a question she had set out to answer for herself in her work), the lack of which in my first draft was its major flaw. After examining Law's memoir, I could see more clearly that the central question of James' memoir is 'how am I bad?' *Unreliable Memoirs* is intensely concerned with James' own foibles and so, by writing about them, illuminating and dramatising them, he is in effect working within the comic frame to transcend them. It should also be noted that James was a reasonably well-known television critic and personality prior to the publication of his memoir. This status likely plays a part in James' desire to explore the question 'how am I bad?' in order to challenge the conventional idea that persons of note possess an inherent virtue or goodness. Law, in contrast, was not a notable person in the way of James prior to the publication of his memoir. In certain circles he was known for his journalism, namely for *Frankie Magazine*, but outside these circles he was not well known. With this in mind, a central question of 'how am I bad?' may not have worked so well for Law (the reading public might be more interested in the benign crimes of a well-known personality than those of a relative nobody).

The Family Law features each of Law's parents and four siblings, following their life on the Queensland Sunshine Coast primarily throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Law calls himself an obsessive-compulsive (8), stating that the work is born out of his obsession with documentation, and an extension of what he calls 'The Family Dictionary' a zine or compendium of in-jokes Law compiles and passes around the family at Christmas (1). Law works with the comic frame to challenge conventional ideas of motherhood and family, sexuality and masculinity, and in doing so enlists his family members into this task.

Law's mother Jenny features most heavily in his memoir. His father, Danny, spent most of his time working before his divorce from Jenny, and moved out of the family home when Law was twelve. 'Baby Love', Law's origin story and the second story in the collection, uses humour's corrective power to challenge the conventional idea of mother-as-nurturer. While the essence of this story is tragedy, the humour lies in the contrast between Law's telling of her past and Jenny's more blunt recollections. 'Baby Love' spans a period of over thirty years, from his mother giving birth to her first baby, up to the present day where the Law siblings are adults. Jenny has five children and one miscarriage, fights almost continuously with her husband, and feels alone and isolated in her new country. Her mainland Chinese mother-in-law adds to this stress with her superstitions around pregnancy: Jenny is forbidden to eat watermelon or pineapple, banned from interacting with farm animals, and, after a miscarriage, "hidden away from the world" because "her situation was a bad omen, possibly contagious" (14). After the birth of her last child she overhears her husband consoling her mother-in-law, who is upset that the baby is a girl. "After giving birth to five children, she felt like someone had finally come clean and summed up her role in life: that as a woman she wasn't anything special, just adequate enough" (17). Law summarises his mother's experience: "Over the course of twenty years, my mother's body underwent a remarkable and cruel transformation, from a petite, small-waisted Chinese-Malaysian beauty

to a pumping, sweating baby machine that spat out five children in quick, bloody, semi-automatic succession" (10).

Obviously, Law's mother is not a semi-automatic machine gun, shooting babies instead of bullets. Here Law is drawing on incongruity. Common in humour, incongruity plays with our learned experience and patterns (Morreall 8-10). Mothers are commonly seen by society as nurturers and so Law's analogising of his mother as a weapon violates the reader's idealised picture of mothers and motherhood, generating humour. It might seem harsh of Law to compare his mother to a weapon, but he soon shows her using even more graphic language to describe giving birth. When Law asks her to rate her five births, compare the speed and pain of each, she responds with a terse "Of course a *man* would ask that question…I'd like to see a man squeeze lemons out of his penis-hole. OUT OF YOUR PENIS-HOLE, BENJAMIN. You can't even begin to imagine, can you? A whole *lemon* – with the points on each end and everything, except this lemon has *limbs.* Out of your *penis-hole.* PENIS. HOLE" (10).

Law effectively positions his mother as a second narrator in this story, presenting her commentary on his depictions of the events of her life. While Law portrays his mother as a figure of tragedy, a woman trapped and without agency, subject to superstition, a bad marriage, and the traumas of the body, her own reflections and voice convey a different picture – an assertive, strong woman; for example, she schools her adult children on the issue of vaginal tears but concludes that "'after that many childbirths, your vagina goes all floppy…Not so stretchy. Dingly-dangly"' (11). Jenny is liberal with her opinion that giving birth is the most embarrassing moment of a woman's life, "Crowning, crowning, crowning, and everybody's just looking at your *hole,* waiting for something to pop out, like a prize" (13).

Here, Law shows Jenny configuring her own story to fit within the comic frame. Burke argues that the comic frame is the opposite of the heroic frame, that the heroic frame magnifies the hero, making the character,

> as great as the situation he confronts, and fortifying the non-heroic individual vicariously, by identification with the hero; but humour reverses this process: it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by *dwarfing the situation.* (43)

Jenny shouts 'penis hole' and describes her vagina as 'dingly-dangly' to dwarf the trauma of child birth, and her frank descriptions that leave Law "light headed" (11) generate humour by destabilising the reader's image of the mother as nurturer. Instead, Jenny is a carnivalesque figure, ridiculing the sacredness of the body by reducing it to its physical functions and failings, and exposing the foolishness of the conventional idea of mother-as-nurturer. Law presents Jenny entertaining and shocking her children with outlandish descriptions of her vagina/'hole' as an act of self-depreciating humour. Regina Barreca sees self-depreciating humour as the most traditional form of women's humour (38), as humour directed toward the self tends to be more ingratiating than aggressive. But by presenting Jenny in this way, Law also affords his mother a great deal of control. While the past Jenny may have been a tragic figure, a victim of circumstance, Law's present-day Jenny is no victim at all. By mocking her past experiences she is exercising control over them, as a way to supersede and overcome her past. Law gives his mother agency in her story by showing her reframing her experiences in retrospect to claim superiority over them. He further gives her agency by making her aware, during construction of the narrative, that he is writing a memoir in which she plays a featured role, and allowing her to provide her own input. Several days after Jenny's comment about post-baby vaginas, she phones Law to clarify: "'Just in case you write about this," she says, "I

wasn't referring to my vagina. My vagina is fine. Write that down: my mother's vagina is fine. In fact, my vagina hasn't been touched in so long, it has sealed back up'"(11).

Law shows Jenny using exaggeration for comic effect. Just as Law presents Jenny's blunt and unsentimental attitude toward life and its tragedies, transcending her own foibles by owning them, his treatment of himself is the same. Law, openly gay, describes "unambiguously male" humans as "creatures" with "feet the size of concrete slabs, five o'clock shadows, legs carved like tree trunks…One assumes their genitals swing between their legs like anvils" (99). He skewers traditional ideas of heteronormative masculinity by refusing to describe it in typical terms of glamour and desirability, instead presenting his friend Daniel as mildly repulsive: "My friend Daniel—someone who was so aggressively heterosexual that he once shat *on* a toilet seat by mistake" (108). In this way, Law presents masculinity as a caricature to draw readers' attention to the ridiculousness of it and to make the reader question the validity of the status quo. Similarly, he turns himself into a caricature. When introducing his own physical appearance, he writes: "When it came to me, it was as though my mother's uterus had had several moments of hesitation in deciding what it'd produce" (99). He further notes that "[t]he result of this indecisiveness was me: an Asian hybrid man-child…thing. Someone with a 27-inch waistline, hands like a well-manicured woman, unsightly and impoverished leg-hair growth, and – inexplicably – a baritone voice that can sometimes sound like a gay James Earl Jones with a cold" (99-100).

By using his own body as a case study, Law directs the reader to see that all bodies are different and absurd in their own ways. But the reader learns that Law is nonetheless concerned that he does not fully fit in and is worried by what he perceives as his lack of traditional desirable masculine attributes. He enrols in a karate class, "bashing the living shit out of people, which was as manly as it got" (102). He joins the gym, and in an effort to build

muscle mass finds himself consuming great quantities of protein shakes, WeetBix and raw eggs (108). This diet leads to some dramatic gastrointestinal consequences:

> 'Benjamin,' Scott finally said. 'This is a new low. Even for you.' He said this firmly but gently, and in the dark I nodded, understanding. Then I farted. Groaning and waving his hands, Scott got up and opened the windows and doors again. Tammy screamed—she could smell it from the next room. It was official: I was repulsive. But while my bowels continued to spasm, expand, then yawn out sulphurous gas into the night, I couldn't help but think, 'Being disgusting. That's manly, isn't it?' (108-109)

Here, Law is owning his foibles, his trying so hard to fit into the heteronormative ideal of masculinity. Rather than a hero's journey, as defined by Joseph Campbell, this is a warning against pride and hubris. His efforts to transform himself into an idealised version of masculinity result not in the five o'clock shadow and legs like tree trunks, but the version of masculinity that is grotesque and smelly. Law is harnessing laughter's degenerative potential as a weapon against the idealised picture of masculinity, and exposing his own body to ridicule in order to similarly expose the foolishness of gender norms.

Because Law is poking fun at himself, this gives him license to poke fun at others, be they members of his family or societal ideals and myths. With Jenny, he uses the comic frame to ask the reader to question traditional ideas of the nurturing mother, and his presentation of himself asks the reader to question traditional ideas of masculinity. Further, by normalising the Law family as a typical Australian family with unique Chinese-Australian characteristics, Law refuse a more typical plot shape for the migrant story. Rather than a rags-to-riches heroic story, or a hopes-dashed story, the comic frame allows their migrant background to become normalised, presenting the Law family as yet another suburban family in Australia.

If Law had opened his story, 'Baby Love,' with Jenny shouting about lemons and penis holes, and failed to describe her history of bodily trauma, a reader might well comment

that his representation of her seems harsh, as my early readers commented about my portrayal of my father. Instead, Jenny's character and reactions emerge in ways that provide her with her own voice and depth.

In re-drafting my narrative, I understood that the comedy could not compromise my family members without compromising myself. I learned from Law's narrative ways that comedy could provide voice and agency to other characters and also be used to ridicule my own characters. As Smith and Watson note, life narratives, constructed from memories are "records of acts of interpretation" (30). In other words, a memoir is a heavily curated piece of work, necessarily leaving out far more of a life than it includes. There are thousands of stories and themes packed into a single life, and one can spin a single story a hundred different ways. This has been my biggest challenge during this process: working out, by trial and error, how to best use the material I have on hand, in a way that is the least damaging to my family. In re-working my material, I sought scenes that both included an element of absurdity, and did not hinge on the unkind motivations of my mother, father or brother.

I found a number of these scenes buried in the draft. The image of Magoo standing naked on a shipping pylon, waving his underwear at the passing car ferry was absurd and vivid; my high school musical being raided for drugs; my mother mercy-killing a parrot fish with a rock; my eight-year-old self accidentally killing my beloved frog; my mother wrapping our corgi in magnets and bandages; my father wrestling a snake in the neighbour's yard. These scenes were submerged in the first draft, so I pulled them out, put them front and centre, and worked backwards. This changed the focus and shifted the narrative away from a tone of laughing at others to laughing at myself. In 'Magoo', for instance, I reveal myself as being unjustly attention-seeking at the end of the story – a foil of Magoo. In 'Musical', I reveal myself as being an out-of-place prima donna. In 'To Have and to Hold', my fantasies about animals and becoming the child bride of David Attenborough, I become an animal

killer. And while ‘Conditions’ makes fun of my mother, I show myself to be a seeker of attention of all kinds.

When the final draft was done, I printed a copy for my parents. On the following Saturday my father showed up bearing the usual gifts: “Your mother wanted me to give you all these paw paws.” He gave me the fruit and looked at the manuscript, scrutinising, I guessed, the large number of pages and the time it would take to read it. My father in particular had previously expressed little interest in reviewing the memoir in its entirety. “Haven’t I already read most of it?” he said, referring to the two or three more complete stories I had already sent him.

“Not even close,” I said. “And you need to read it properly or down the track you might decide to sue me.”

He took it with reluctance, and roughly a week later I called to check on his progress. “Oh, that,” he said. “Yeah, it was great. Although I don’t remember that kangaroo’s name being Benny. And that bridge we crossed in the flood was a train bridge not a road bridge.”

“It was excellent,” my mother said. They had me on speaker. “Very easy to read.” She then changed the subject to more important things. “How were those paw paws? If you’ve got any left you’ll need to eat them today. They’ll go bad if you leave them any longer.”

When I finished the phone call, a long one about the challenges of growing paw paws on a sand dune, I opened my laptop and changed the road bridge to a train bridge. For a moment it felt like all the work and anguish I had put into the manuscript had been for nothing, and that nobody really cared. But then I remembered the feedback on my first draft. My early readers and I had discussed my father at length because I had unintentionally portrayed him as “an arsehole”. This was a problem that needed a lot of work and reflection to solve, and during the phone call to my parents that day, my mother’s only problem was her paw paws.

My experience thus resembled that of Mimi Schwartz, as discussed earlier in this chapter. I had shared Schwartz's anxiety about sending my pre-publication memoir manuscript to my parents. Like Schwartz, I had been afraid that writing honestly about them would garner a reaction of resentment and anger. Reflecting on the reasons that reaction did not come, Szhwartz points to her aim of writing about them with understanding, in intentionally setting out to represent her family members without an agenda, and to treat them with compassion and complexity.

It was not until the re-drafting process that I started to see what Schwartz might mean by 'understanding'. By refocusing the stories in my manuscript to pivot around a number of central absurd scenes and scenarios that allowed my characters to emerge as fully rounded I have, in effect, better humanised my father. The finished version of the manuscript is much less about my family members per se, and more about the situations we have found ourselves in over the years, by accident or design. Yes, my father wrestled a snake in the neighbour's yard but largely because he wanted to protect it from the neighbour's shovel. Yes, my mother beat a parrot fish to death with a rock but only because it was wounded and unlikely to recover. This became my way of presenting my family with understanding, revealing their characters within a situational context. Restructuring *The Ocean is a Liar* to fit the comic frame eliminated the dichotomy of villain and victim and shifted the focus from crime to folly. We, as a family, were acting and reacting to absurd situations outside of our control, and in this way I discovered the ways in which humour can be used as an effective tool to represent family members without harming them.

Chapter Three: The Affordances of Humour in Representing Region

In 2018 the ABC released the six-part Australian comedy, *Squinters,* about Sydney commuters driving to and from work in peak hour traffic. The show features a number of well-known Australian actors and comedians including Tim Minchin, Jacki Weaver, Sussie Youssef and Sam Simmons. In episode 6, 'End of the Road'*,* two brothers, played by Sam Simmons and Damon Herriman, dressed in suits, are driving to the funeral of their mother who has just passed away in Albury.

> Herriman: "It's a fucked up place to go, Albury."
>
> Simmons: "I mean, you know, it could be worse, could be somewhere like *Townsville*."
>
> Herriman: "No, Townsville's actually come a long way in the last few years. Apparently they're getting an Imax cinema." (ep 6 02:17)

My first reaction to this was offence. *How dare they talk about my home town like that?* I thought. *And Townsville is not getting an Imax cinema. We already had one in the 90s, but it closed years ago*.

My second reaction was one of recognition tinged with shame. I had made negative jokes and comments about Townsville many times, probably thousands of times over the course of my life and so my offence at this joke was perhaps hypocritical.

When I saw this episode, I was in the process of finalising the first draft of the creative component of this thesis. At the age of about twelve or thirteen I came to realise that Townsville was viewed by many outsiders as a cultural fringe, a place to be dismissed or overlooked by the cultural centres of the southern capital cities, but this negative joke, broadcast on national television in 2018, more than twenty years later, brought home to me in a very real way the fact that the situation has not really changed. The *Squinters* joke, crude

and throwaway as it was, clearly tapped into some kind of broad national attitude toward Townsville, as if that was all we deserved: crude, throwaway jokes at our expense. This moment had a galvanising effect on my creative project. I'd embarked on the creative work with a vague idea that I wanted to write a humorous memoir but had no real sense of why. This scene in *Squinters* gave me something to argue against. I could fight humour with humour, use humour not to further denigrate regional life but to highlight the absurdities of some of the regional stereotypes that I had encountered throughout my life. I wanted to explore, through my creative work, how a memoir writer can use humour to represent a culturally marginalised place like north Queensland in a nuanced way. And furthermore, how, with humour, could I explore and highlight absurdities around my internalised attitudes towards my home region: how these expectations played out in the behaviours and attitudes of the childhood and coming-of-age self?

I cannot remember the exact moment when I first started hating Townsville, but it was during early high school. And it was not just me. Almost all of my friends hated it too. We did not really know why. It was just the done thing. Looking back, I believe we hated it because subconsciously we believed, from television and other media, that 'cool' things, *real* lives, were only possible elsewhere, in Brisbane perhaps, or Sydney or Melbourne. None of the television shows we watched were set in Townsville. None of the books we read were set there. [2] The national news programs almost never mentioned anywhere north of Brisbane. When we saw Australian life reflected back at us through the media we felt like Townsville

[2] I did not discover Thea Astley until well into adulthood, and Ian Townsend's *Affection* was almost a decade away from publication. I watched the film *Radiance* on VHS several years after its 1998 release. Everyone I knew watched this film either at the cinema or on VHS or DVD when it hit the video stores. We all thought it was filmed somewhere near Ingham when in reality it was filmed mainly in south central Queensland. Despite this fact of inauthenticity, the cane field setting was enough for us to claim it as ours, that and the fact that the media were calling it an important film. *Radiance* gave us a sense of legitimacy we felt we had never had before.

did not exist, like we were nothing and, rather than blame the media or larger cultural attitudes, we blamed Townsville for not being a significant enough place, as with north Queensland in general.

Like many of my friends, I left Townsville directly after I graduated from the local university. I moved to London for a couple of years, then to Melbourne, and then to Brisbane where I lived for almost seven years before moving back up to Townsville. As a child, Townsville (of which Magnetic Island is technically a suburb) was just my life. I had no real opinion about the place. It was simply where I and everyone I knew lived. I knew of other cities and towns in the country and the rest of the world but I lived in Townsville. Most people I met in London had never heard of any aspect of my home region – Magnetic Island, Townsville, or north Queensland – so I told them I was from 'near Cairns' and then obliged them when they asked me to say "flamin' galah" like Alf from *Home and Away*. Melbourne and Brisbane were a different story. Back in Australia when I told people I was from Townsville they either screwed up their noses or fell into an awkward silence. One woman even apologised—"I'm so *sorry*"—as if growing up in Townsville amounted to some horrible childhood trauma. Most of these people had never been to Townsville or anywhere else in north Queensland and yet the general sentiment from people I met in Melbourne and Brisbane was that I had been lucky to get out of there alive. My Townsville-originating friends who lived in Melbourne and Brisbane were receiving similar responses from people they were meeting, people who had formed negative opinions of Townsville despite having never visited the city.

At first I defended my home region, figuring I could educate these people by explaining that crocodile attacks were rare, stinger nets protected swimmers from box jellyfish, and storms often did more damage to Brisbane and Melbourne than cyclones did to Townsville. I explained that not all north Queensland residents voted for One Nation and

actually the music scene up there was alright. But almost no one believed me. The opinions, if not the evidence, were overwhelming: Townsville was the edge of the world, a lawless, hostile frontier town, and anyone who thought otherwise about anywhere in the north Queensland region had to be mad.

The longer I lived away from the region, the more I believed what was being told to me: that it was a place to be reviled, that I *had* been lucky to get out of there alive, so when I was offered a scholarship to complete a PhD at James Cook University, I packed up my house in Brisbane and moved back up north with a heavy sense of trepidation. How, after so many years of apologising for my birth place, was I supposed to move home and write a memoir?

I was drawn to humour partly out of desperation. People enjoy humour, I thought. Maybe they will forgive me for the setting if I can make it funny. But more than that, I came to realise through the drafting process, I wanted to use humour to depict the region in a way that represented my lived experiences growing up there, not as the southerners perceived it. I wanted to use humour to explore and expose these southern attitudes of the north as outdated and absurd.

The continued tenacity of these assumptions and attitudes could be related, I believe, to the north's relative lack of mainstream childhood autobiographical output. In 1989, Colmer noted that "the rhythms and atmospheres of each state have been captured by a number of gifted writers in regional autobiographies or autobiographical novels" (11). He lists several seminal works for each state bar Queensland, for which he lists only David Malouf's *Johnno*, a work set in south-east Queensland. The last thirty years have not seen a vast number of autobiographical works come out of the north Queensland region. Two most notable examples of commercially published autobiography include Cathy McLennan's *Salt Water*, and Brentley Frazer's *Scoundrel Days*, published recently in 2016 and 2017 respectively.

Arguably the biggest factor in the continued survival of negative southern attitudes toward north Queensland relates to the region's physical distance from the southern capital cities, as well as its late colonial settlement. Pastoral expansion and mining advanced into north Queensland in the mid-late 1800s, long after the colonial settlement of Sydney in 1788. To the early colonists of the area, pushing up from the south, the region of north Queensland was decidedly foreign. This is reflected in the work of the early humour writers who saw the place from an outsider's perspective. Cheryl Frost, in her essay, "Humour and Satire in Early North Queensland Writing", notes that the humour of north Queensland's early colonisers tended to focus on the physical (irritating or exceptional) aspects of the environment, and that "insects, above all mosquitoes, were a common theme" (35). She quotes Robert Thomas Wood, who in the 1860s spent a year on a station west of Bowen and noted that:

> If I sat down to read, a dozen or more [mosquitoes] would commence to buzz playfully around my head, settling now and then and thrusting their sharp bills deep under the skin until I was almost maddened by their annoying attentions. It is useless however to take revenge in action. The only defence possible is to smoke fast and furiously, and brush partly away any individual whose long stay proves him to be more gluttonous than the rest. (35-36)

Frost argues that Victorian prudery ruled out sexual and scatological humour (35), and that as such, Thomas Wood creates humour by describing the mosquito in hyperbolic terms. This passage is almost slapstick in feel: the gentleman and his ineffectual attempts to combat the unreasonable mosquito. Violence seems out of the question for Thomas Wood. He cannot bring himself to squash one against his skin and so he uses the only defences available to him: smoking furiously and brushing the beasts away.

Frost finds that crocodiles were also a favourite source of early north Queensland humour, inspiring "comparatively complex tales in which an element of fantasy dominated.

They were part of a mystique which set out to prove that the region was inhabited by larger and stranger creatures than anywhere else – that it was a land where the impossible happened" (36).

This myth-making quality of early north Queensland humour writing speaks to what Stephen Gray defines as the 'first phase' of colonial writing or, what Richard Rive would call the 'Scenic Special' (7). According to Gray, the first phase "has always brought back to armchair travelers the colour, the adventures and the exotic novelty of other places…It is powerful because it insists on unlikeness, on measuring the life out there against the norms back home" (7). Here, Gray's 'back home' refers to the United Kingdom and his authors are white South African colonists. But, even as a writer situated in north Queensland writing to a southern Australian readership, the gaze operates similarly. The writer is an outsider in a strange land providing entertaining, eloquently descriptive accounts for the armchair traveler at home, down south. Gray's first phase writers wrote for an English audience and north Queensland's early humour writers wrote for a southern Australian audience, but each played up the landscape and wildlife for entertainment purposes.

Phase two, as Gray describes it, is a reaction against the phase one writings, when the writer, often a first generation person, is at home in the 'new' place and sees the landscape from the point of view of belonging to it. This writer "is one who finds the phase one literature demeaning or clouded with a mythological haze that is unworkable for him or her…Phase two writers use place flamboyantly and assertively to proclaim their literary rights; they use the landscape as a battlefield on which to claim their stake" (8).

Arguably the most notable phase two writer of north Queensland is Thea Astley. A prolific writer and observer of the north Queensland landscape and environment, she released sixteen novels and two short story collections between 1958 and 1999. With "her reputation as a sharp-eyed satirist of Australian social mores," (Lamb x) Astley's humour, unlike the

earlier north Queensland writers, is not merely characterised by mosquitoes and crocodiles. Where, as Frost notes, the humour of early north Queensland writers, up until around 1910, tended to be optimistic, light-hearted and simple (35), Astley's humour is marked by satire and "sometimes brutal irony" (Sheridan "Astley, Thea" n.p.) to portray place and how human relationships play out within it. Astley, perhaps reacting against the first phase representations of north Queensland (where place is the butt of the joke), turns the butt of the joke onto southern expectations of north Queensland as a 'Scenic Special'. Astley's environment is characterised by "the uncontrollable fecundity of the tropics, their uncaring seductiveness and casual destruction" (Taylor 246). Further, according to Sheridan and Genoni, most of her protagonists are outsiders to the place, "very often urban dwellers, and she satirises their attempts to escape from their failings in the isolation of small towns or the far north coast" (xiv). Bird describes these self-conscious protagonists as urban expatriates struggling to "find an expressive space within their uncongenial surroundings" (187).

Astley could be considered an urban expatriate herself, born, raised and educated in Brisbane so in part, she is may be using her protagonists to satirise a version of herself. But in "Being a Queenslander: A form of literary and geographical conceit", published by *Southerly* in 1976, we see glimpses of more personal motivations for her treatment of the urban expatriate. She notes that to southerners, Queensland has always been a cultural joke (261):

> I have an idea that Queenslanders were not early conscious of a kind of federal racism directed at them until late in the war and after. The scandalous implications of the Brisbane Line which still brings a rush of blood to the necks of the old-timers were perhaps what first directed the Queenslander's realisation that he was disregarded, a joke, a butt, to the attempt to compete and prove cultural worth. (253)

The Brisbane Line, for reference, was an apparent federal government World War II plan to, in case of Japanese invasion, sacrifice pretty much everything north of Brisbane. It is

"recalled as scenes of panic and flight by north Queenslanders fleeing south in fear of Japanese invasion" (Cottle 113). So it would seem that even worse than being a Queenslander is being a *north* Queenslander. Astley highlights her experience of snobbery in Brisbane after having spent five years teaching in Townsville: "I don't think my love affair with Queensland ripened into its mature madness until I came south to live. Maybe it was the resentment I felt when the Education Department appointed me on the status of 'first year out', negating at a pencil-stroke the five years I had been teaching in the north" (254). So while Astley may not fit neatly into Gray's idea of the second phase writer often being a 'first generation person', she clearly identifies with and feels more at home in north Queensland than the more urbanised Brisbane.

Perhaps it was her unfortunate encounter with the Education Department that triggered her "interest in the alienated and outcast, and the sardonic eye she cast on the snobberies of class and consumerism" (Sheridan "Thea Astley: A Woman among the Satirists of Post-War Modernity" 261). She had seen first-hand how the south marginalised the north of the state and it made her angry.

The story that best encapsulates this is 'Ladies Need Only Apply' (Astley *Collected Stories*), first published in Astley's short story collection, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple.* Sadie, the story's protagonist, is on extended leave from her teaching job in Brisbane. For roughly a month she has been staying in an unnamed town in north Queensland and is getting bored. On a whim she replies to a newspaper advertisement placed by Leo, a man in need of help in his home and garden. Against her better judgement, Sadie meets with him and agrees to go with Leo to his "blueprint for a slovenly Eden" (126), deep in the rainforest to live in almost complete isolation. The combination of this isolation, Leo's prickly and manipulative nature, and a tropical storm, eventually tips Sadie into sexual madness.

From a brief narrative outline of 'Ladies Need Only Apply', Astley's story seems entirely tragic and devoid of humour, but it *is* there, apparent in her word play around observations and descriptions.

Sadie's humour mocks herself and others. Sadie, prior to meeting Leo, "for a pointless month already…had baited herself and lain unhooked beside a motel pool stuffed with ockers from the south" (121). Irony and incongruity humour techniques are at work here. With the words 'baited' and 'unhooked', Sadie is compared to a fish but one that lays on land, wanting to be caught: she is the metaphorical, absurd 'fish out of water'. Sadie also judges the other people from the south, dismissing them as 'ockers'. Ironically, Sadie is unable to see that a local might view her as an ocker from the south, lying scantily-clad by the pool, waiting for sex to find her. Later, Sadie compares herself to an animal again:

> She felt at times, despairingly, that she was one of those desperate women who infested the waters from March to October. '"The stingers move out," the locals used to say, "and the birds move in. You get bitten either way."' (122)

With the word 'infested', Sadie is comparing herself to a vermin which leads the reader to think of stinging jellyfish, a creature that phase one writer would likely have treated with hyperbole and exaggeration. But this expectation is overturned with the reference to birds, in this context a different kind of vermin: not actual birds but southern women who replace the stingers in the water from March to October. Here it is the woman, Sadie, not the stingers or the literal, feathered-and-beaked birds, who is presented as dangerous, desperate for sex. The locals, aware that she is only interested in finding her own version of the Scenic Special, reject and avoid her.

Using the dismissive term 'postcard tropadise' to describe her surroundings, implying that she is only there for a laugh due to the "aimlessness of leave (too much of it) and middle-age (too much of that)…The product is bravado loneliness in a postcard tropadise (the greens

are too green! the blues too blue!)" (120), Sadie is waiting for something to happen to her while refusing to take anything seriously. With her carefully enamelled nails and snappy expensive casual wear, the reader glimpses qualities of pretentiousness that Astley despises. But while Sadie may be a snob, she is at the same time self-mocking and fragile with "an eye, increasingly less casual, flicking, mock-flicking over the personal columns…There's nothing quite like recognising buddies in misfortune. My God, were some of them for laughs" (120). Coming across Leo's ad, "Companion house keeper required for macrobiotic musician…Genuine ladies need only apply" (120), Sadie is delighted by its "misplaced adverb coupled with the pretentiousness of the demand" (121). This wording may imply that 'genuine ladies' will be accepted immediately, but again, irony is at work here in that Sadie sees, delights in, the pretentions of others but fails to recognise her own.

Sadie meets Leo, who insists on eating natural foods only, "nuts. Fruit. Never meat, you understand. Lots of vegetables, raw. And I rarely cook. Cooking destroys essentials" (123). Listening to this, she makes the wry observation, "natural foods need only apply" (123), enjoying her private send-up of his personal ad. She does not like him, with his "bushwhacker beard of streaked white and his bald skull [with a] leathery and repulsive tan to it" (123), but finds herself struck by his self-assuredness. "His blatant belief in his rightness was affecting her like sunstroke" (124). Then, against her better judgement, her 'bravado loneliness' kicks in and she agrees to go with him. "It all seem[s] like a bad joke, one gone wrong, whose only redemption would be in the later jocular recounting, the wacky thrill of the send-up" (124).

The joke gone wrong is the central premise of this story by Astley. The month Sadie had spent in the motel, strolling along the beach and lying by the pool in relative civilisation, she had been in control and could feel a comfortable sense of superiority in mocking herself,

her situation, and the other people around her. She was the joke-maker. But when she goes with Leo to his remote property, the joke changes tack, venturing into darker territory.

Leo is a semi-hermit who hates 'the city' and lives alone in a house with "only three walls, the front merely a verandah'd extension of the inner room, unenclosed but so massed with plants and streamers of vine it seemed stubbornly to be the bush itself" (127). There are no expensive clothing shops, no swimming pool or beach. Leo is Sadie's antithesis, as her new environment is the antithesis of the comfort she is used to. Sadie is no longer in control, as we see in Leo's reaction to Sadie's concern that he has no way to lock his house against burglars, no way to protect his things:

> "You must be from town, Miss Klein!" he said, mocking. "I don't have many – what you call *things.* Anyone after my few scraps'd have to come a damn long way. They'd have to be really looking, wouldn't they?"
>
> The more he outmanoeuvred her the more the dislike settled in, became familiar. Why, we could almost be friends, she thought angrily, regaining her irony. (127)

Here it seems that Sadie has met her match, a man who can mock and antagonise just as well as she can. She is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to him, and to the foreign environment she has found herself in. Leo is as remote and different as the environment he lives in. He has rejected conventional life and chooses to live on the land in the middle of nowhere. He embraces the natural world. Sadie, thrust together with this unfamiliar man in an unfamiliar environment, describes the garden's "tropical swagger" but also the "intransigent fecundity" that dominates "two shacks which were cringing beneath banana clumps, passion-vines, granadillas" (126), the garden and "the barbaric leaf shape and sheen with its succulent pulpy cannibal gobbling of heat and moisture" (131). This is how Sadie views Leo's world: as a menacing, seductive challenge, but still a joke. "The utter difference in life-style gave her

much inward amusement and she hummed 'If my friends could see me now', dragging hoses round the lower acre" (131). She's playing a game, toying with the idea of this lifestyle and this man, and pretending, with her mocking irony, that she is still in charge of herself. But Leo's withholding and manipulative nature starts to wear her down. His compliments about how she is losing weight are back-handed (135). At times he is uncommunicative and distant and she finds herself deliberately seeking his approval, feeling like one of her own students back in Brisbane, eager to be noticed (132). She has to remind herself this whole 'adventure' "was only for giggles" (132).

As the scrub and hard work in the garden strip her of her excess weight, Leo strips her of her city pretentions, attacking her as a "puking bloody-minded product of every bloody-minded piece of published magazine garbage that ever was" (140). When she expresses a wish to leave, he taunts her:

> "Leave? Just because I've told you a few good-humoured home truths? We both have. Where's that logic of yours, eh? The very thing that attracted me about you. Where's that genuine search for another life-style? You didn't like the one you had, you've told me that often enough. No, Sadie, my dear, you won't leave. Because I won't help you to and more fundamentally than that—you don't want to." (140)

She remains out of stubbornness, locked in a game of chicken with Leo, a demented kind of foreplay, each wanting the other to admit weakness. But the reader knows that Sadie will snap first. Her fragility is no match for Leo and the environment's hardness and inflexibility. Then the rain hits and she is really trapped. Her jokes are gone as the environment asserts its dominance: "Monsoon clouds kept hauling their freight from the north as the sticky heat of the day glued the landscape into a ripening circle that sprouted trees, more fruit. Pulp. Pulp and mould" (143). The rain goes on for days and Sadie admits her first true feeling, "star[ing] out at climate shock. 'It's too much. Too hard. To sudden'" (143).

Leo is as merciless as the weather: '"But it's always like this. Every year. We're in for weeks of it now,' he said maliciously. 'Surely you're not frightened by the prospect! You're like all southerners, and when I say southerners I mean anyone below the tropic. They throw a micky the first time they cop it. The Noah syndrome'" (143).

After several days of non-stop rain, Sadie, full of hatred for Leo, stripped literally naked in the pouring rain, makes the trek through the flooded river, "snatching at slimy weeds on the far slope, grasping, slipping, losing, dragging, and at last hauling herself through mud and manana ooze onto higher ground" (147). She falls on the way from her shack to Leo's house. She is filthy and bleeding, utterly reduced. She has a vision of herself, "an animal vision, as slowly, on all fours now, she crawled up the higher ground the last thirty paces to his shack, unaware of water, pain, or blood, and she laughed, crawling towards that other face in the mirror, knowing nothing most beautifully" (148). The north has stripped Sadie of her pretentions and mockery. She is reduced to her most basic form: naked, animalistic, crawling, and stripped of artifice. At the foot of Leo's stars, naked and on all fours, she succumbs wholly to the rawness of the tropical region's environment and to Leo, begs, "Please" and finally he accepts her. Sadie earlier called this adventure a joke gone bad but irony is working here again; the joke didn't go bad, she just didn't realise the joke was on her the whole time.

In 'Ladies Need Only Apply', Astley's use of irony is dark in that the false bravado and snobbery of the southerner gets torn apart by the north's savage indifference to artifice. Astley's north Queensland is a place of extremes of both environment and the people who have been shaped by it. Here, Astley produces a vision of the north as a dangerous, seductive, unknowable place to the outsider. Neither the town in which Sadie spends her first month laying by the pool is named, nor the area in which Leo lives, although I assume that the story is set somewhere around the Cairns or Daintree area. This assumption is based on my knowledge, as a north Queensland resident, of the region's various climates and geographies,

but a southerner with limited experiential knowledge of north Queensland might assume that the setting of 'Ladies Need Only Apply' could be anywhere north of Rockhampton. Furthermore, her 1987 novel, *It's Raining in Mango,* is set in a fictional north Queensland town; Mango has never existed.

Emma Doolan describes Astley as a writer of the tropical, northern, hinterland gothic (56), and with Astley's love of the word 'fecund' to describe the north's environment, this description seems apt. Gothic literature "conjugates with the dark side of contemporaneity" (Mulvey-Roberts xvii) by foregrounding the sinister and provoking unease, features of which place plays a major part. Allison Craven, discussing the Gothic elements of the film *Radiance,* notes that the filmmakers frame Queensland as "anti-Eden, an un-Paradise, figured by abundant, gothic canefields" (Craven n.p.). The Queensland of *Radiance* is an unfriendly, uncomfortable space, full of dark secrets and fractured relationships. Astley's place of north Queensland is a similar anti-Eden. The landscape is a battle ground in the way of the second phase writer, but in Astley's de-centering of place, her not naming or fictionalising the names of towns in which some of her stories are set, she is creating a new mythology of north Queensland as a vast, non-specific, perhaps even homogenous environment where humans encounter the savagery of the elements and each other.

I cannot help but wonder what Astley would make of me, a product of north Queensland's environment and society. And, even more than this, not am I only *from* north Queensland, I'm from *Magnetic Island*, a region perhaps even more peripheral to the mainland. If I were to find myself represented as one of Astley's characters, what would she have me do? As I would be unlikely to be positioned as a protagonist, would Astley have me punishing the southerner for her pretensions? Mocking her expensive clothes and fear of monsoon rain? To be honest, that might be a role I would rather enjoy playing; I have, once or twice, been guilty of mocking a southern expatriate for his or her fear of an impending

cyclone. I do hope, however, that Astley would not have me, or my island for that matter, drive a southerner to madness.

I think the main difference between Astley and myself might be anger. Having reviewed some of her work and the words of scholars around her work, I feel that Astley's heavy disdain for southern snobbery is an engine that drives her dark, ironic humour. I too, have formed an impression that north Queensland is viewed by many southerners as a cultural joke but this did not come as a shock to me as it did to Astley; I don't recall having an experience like Astley's recollection of the Brisbane Education Department disregarding her five years teaching in Townsville and classing her as "first year out." Or if I did, the episode does not stick in my mind because I would have expected it. If north Queenslanders realised they were a 'joke' during the Second World War, it is only natural that I have been shaped by that living memory: internalised it to the point where my reaction is merely a shrug of the shoulders and a "tell me something I don't know".

Like Astley, I am interested in human relationships with place. Unlike Astley, however, my characters are not outsiders or visitors trying to escape their isolation or loneliness in the north. They already live there and have made their lives there. There are no outsiders in my stories. We are all insiders contending with place of our region, except as it is regarded by outsiders. Nobody is 'encountering the north'. We are already 'of' it.

In Gray's three-phase model, "phase three writers value an autochthonous readership first, for whom the advertisement of colourful landscapes is simply ludicrous…[it is a] coming into its own of literature (9)". This phase certainly applies to Australian writing at large with "its own publishing industry, including newspapers, magazines and journals, its own self-referring use of language, its mutual understanding of an infolded set of norms and values, its own context of myth about the past and the present…its own community of readership or audience, which receives the work and feeds back into it reciprocally" (9). The

phase three writer does not however, I argue, apply comfortably to the north Queensland context because the region is still grappling with the Scenic Special, addressing its work to outside readers. Our population is simply too small to support its own mature publishing industry and self-referring use of language, and in this way I, as a second phase writer, am writing to a southern/external audience because I do not wish to preach to the converted. I, like Astley, want to speak to a southern audience and re-contextualise its perceptions of north Queensland.

Astley's approach to place is to amplify the dangers and seductions of the region, to make the outsider expectations of place the butt of the joke. In contrast, I have attempted to do almost the exact opposite. Firstly, the settings of my stories are specific and named. The reader is rooted in place and invited into my life and childhood. The environment is not alien or dangerous, vengeful or dramatic as seen from an outsider protagonist's point of view, but more domestic, ordinary, as seen from the point of view of an insider protagonist. The insider protagonist, however, is not immune from the outsider point of view, and it is this tension of perspective between insider point of view and influence from outsider point of view that I have attempted to exploit and explore through humour.

The Scenic Special remains strong in north Queensland. As Gray notes, it is still with us today in the form of documentary programmes (7). Magnetic Island, in my lifetime and before, has primarily been advertised as a tourist destination where travellers can experience the 'holiday of a lifetime' diving on the reef, indulging in a sunset sailing cruise, or hugging a koala at the wildlife park. Islands in general seem to maintain a firm grip on the outsider imagination as redemptive utopias, offering the promise of adventure, as either an idyllic inhabited island or an uninhabited place on which to start again (Howe 10-12). The idea holds that an island is a departure from real life, an opportunity to remove oneself from the strictures of 'civilisation'. I watched *Gilligan's Island* and *Swiss Family Robinson.* I read

Lord of the Flies and *Treasure Island.* As a child, I found these depictions of islands and saw them not as a mainland-dweller might, as exaggerated and unrealistic (possibly with the exception of *Lord of the Flies*) but as, in part, representative of my life and the potentials of what it could and should be. As it was, however, my ordinary life on an island was comparatively boring and suburban; in my view, I lived in an ordinary house and went to an ordinary school.

The outsider gaze is present in both Astley's story and my memoir manuscript but in different ways. Astley treats the outsider gaze with derision and darkly ironic humour. In 'Ladies Need Only Apply', the joke is on the expectations and pretensions of the outsider in a strange land. In my memoir manuscript I have similarly attempted to use humour to highlight the absurdities of the outsider gaze but through the internalisation of this gaze by the child protagonist, by the tension/collision between the fantasies of the child and the reality of the experience: the child trying and failing to conform to unrealistic outsider expectations of what an island child should be. This is perhaps most obvious in the way my child persona attempted to capture the attention of Sir David Attenborough in 'To Have and to Hold'.

During the first drafting of my manuscript, I wanted to portray my island experiences as normal, however, I focused on the human stories, stories of my family and others I have encountered over the years because I felt that this would produce a work that would have an appeal outside of the north Queensland region. I deliberately avoided locating the reader in place because I was afraid that it would alienate the wider audience I was aiming at. I wanted the manuscript to speak to dubious southerners, to say 'we up here are the same as you down there' and I thought the best way to do this was to only mention place in passing and only when absolutely necessary. This was a reaction against both the Scenic Special and Astley's representation of the north, in that I intended to decentre the environment in my work. My intentions for my creative work were what one might call, adapting Gray's model to humour,

second phase humour writing, only including the environment as and where it would be relevant to the human narrative. I did not want to, as Gray observes of other second phase writers, use landscape as a battleground, a major source of inspiration and narrative premise. The fact that my manuscript was set in north Queensland would be incidental. First and foremost it would show that the day-to-day dramas and complications of life and coming-of-age are universal. This was how I planned to tackle the unpleasant stereotypes of my region, by giving them the silent treatment, refusing to acknowledge them at all.

Magnetic Island, in the 1980s and '90s was isolated (and still is) by the ocean, but is by no means not cut off. The ferry service then, as now, operated every day and ran services to the mainland roughly every hour. The trip took between twenty minutes and half an hour. We had a primary school that catered to around a hundred students. There was a supermarket and a hardware store. There was a medical centre, and an ambulance service. There were three pubs, a fish and chip shop, butcher, petrol station, bus and taxi service, several dive shops that catered largely to tourists, a helipad to run emergency cases off the island to the hospital on the mainland, several locally-run restaurants, a bakery, post office and a National Australia Bank branch. Many workers commuted daily to work on the mainland, and children of high school age commuted daily to high schools on the mainland. The population was approximately fifteen hundred people. In short, it was a relatively ordinary community in an unusual location, or so I thought.

At the end of the first draft, however, I realised I had unintentionally unleashed a whole series of north Queensland stereotypes: an unconventional artist family holed up on an island; an oddball nudist; a boxing kangaroo. Collectively, the stories amounted to a two-dimensional representation of my place and its people, exoticised and played up for entertainment purposes. Inadvertently, by focussing on character rather than place, I

reproduced a set of characters who comprised a laughable, oddball community. Irritatingly, I had written my own Scenic Special, without nuance or context.

One of the major problems in the first draft was the representation of Magoo. Few of the other residents stripped off at the isolated Rocky Bay. Nobody else rode a bike around Nelly Bay clad in nothing but a sagging pair of underwear, as I saw Magoo do many times when I was a child. Despite his behaviour being out of place even within his own community, however, it was tolerated. There was the occasional raised eyebrow but he was never chastised or attacked. I doubt that this behaviour would have been tolerated in an Australian capital city (also the cooler weather might have put him off); but the residents of Magnetic Island had room for an oddball which may account for why he came to live on the island in the first place.

In the first draft, Magoo, like his cartoon namesake, was a simple, bumbling cartoon character. The story had humour but it was of the mocking variety. In this initial version I had held Magoo up as an object of ridicule. The ending read like a warning to conform or risk succumbing to public failure and humiliation. And worse, he was a villain (stealing the mast off my family's boat). This version of him played into the stereotype of a strange man from a strange place that could be dismissed as too unusual and unrelatable to be of any real value. I needed to humanise Magoo, to make his behaviour seem less strange and more relatable to a wider audience. This meant that I needed a new protagonist and, since memoir was my genre, I had to be that protagonist. I had hoped to keep myself and my bad behaviour out of the story since as a child I saw him only as a non-conformist and had hated him for it, throwing rocks at him and shouting abuse. But by leaving out my part of the story I was only continuing the abuse. I toyed with the idea of rebranding the story as fiction, hiding my bad behaviour behind 'based on a true story'. Fictionalising it would have spared me some judgement,

perhaps, but it would have cast doubt on every other element of the story and rendered the crucial pylon scene unbelievable and so was out of the question.

It was through the process of redrafting that Magoo I realised I had left myself out of many of the stories and because of this a lot of contextualising place information required to ground and add complexity to events was also absent. 'Spitting Distance' and 'To Have and to Hold' were particularly problematic in their first draft versions. Without my character as a fully-formed, pushy, irritating protagonist, *Spitting Distance* was simply an anecdote about a fishing trip gone wrong and 'To Have and to Hold' was a whacky adventure with a kangaroo. In short, the events, rather than the character/s were driving the narrative which had not been the case in reality.

The key to all three of these stories I realised, during the second draft rewrite, was my motivation as a child internalising and acting out the outsider messages I was consuming through television. I watched cop shows, fishing shows, and Attenborough documentaries and saw my own life through their lens. Instead of seeing these shows as a curated set of messages and ideals, I saw them as instructive. In David Attenborough I saw my future self. I loved animals and had access to a lot of them so it made sense in my child's mind that nature documentarian should be my obvious destiny. The message I took from fishing shows was the same; I had access to the ocean so naturally I would be successful in conquering it. In the deviant "bad guys" of the cop shows I saw Magoo. In the particular programmes I watched, the bad guy was brought to justice by a maverick cop or cops who often had to defy orders to investigate the case and make the arrest. I saw myself as that cop, particularly when my parents insisted that he was harmless and that I should leave him alone. The messages I received from television told me that if I found my day-to-day existence tedious I had no one to blame but myself. These messages told me that while I was limited to the confines of an island, I could make something interesting and glamorous out of the things I already had

access to. Consequently, I came to believe that everyone who was not out filming koalas, wrangling marlins and hunting down bad guys was doing island life wrong. I was being fed tropes that seemed beautiful and dangerous, and I wanted to be them.

Through the writing, however, as I found in the first draft of the creative work, exploring place and tropes through humour is a more complicated exercise. While *The Ocean is a Liar* deliberately holds up past, ignorant selves to mockery, in order to draw out and explore issues of place, this needed to be tempered with techniques from the incongruity school of humour.

Inserting myself into the story as a new protagonist allowed me to draw more heavily on incongruous humour techniques to add depth to the narrative. Incongruous humour is concerned with overturning expectations. In the case of creative writing, the author sets up reader expectations and then upends them, and it is this sudden shift in the reader's perspective, the surprise if you will, that generates humour. While tropes and stereotypes might be convenient to television and fiction, they can also be convenient to humour because most are familiar and, frankly, easily dismantled by the harsh light of reality.

After reworking the structure of 'Magoo,' the final version introduces him as occupying two familiar tropes simultaneously, that of island dweller as non-conformist 'other', and TV villain who the thirteen-year-old narrator is intent on bringing to justice. By the story's end, these positions have been flipped—Magoo becomes an unlikely hero, lauded by his community, and the narrator is revealed to be misguided in her pursuit of him.

The humorous function of this structure allowed the story to move from its first draft in which it appeared as a warning to conform or risk public humiliation, to its final draft in which it was developed as a warning against applying unfair stereotypes to people. Based on nothing more than his habit of nude sunbathing, the child narrator had projected onto him a

fiction of different-means-bad. But it is his very difference, his naked stranding on a shipping pylon and consequent write up in the papers, that turns out to be his triumph.

'To Have and to Hold' and 'Spitting Distance' underwent similar drafting processes to draw out place through humour. Unlike 'Magoo', the structure of these stories is not particularly incongruous or humorous in nature. These two stories, in their final form, present the collision between idealised visions of the natural world and the reality of my experience. While both end rather tragically with the accidental death of the beloved frog in 'To Have and to Hold,' and the hollow victory of catching and eating a parrot fish in 'Spitting Distance,' incongruous humour is present throughout, tempering the tragedy and shining the harsh light of reality onto tropes of place.

'To Have and to Hold' opens with birds, but not in the way of an Attenborough documentary. These birds are not described by their exotic, luscious plumage, and curious mating habits. Instead, they are loud and aggressive. They wake up my family at five am "whether we like it or not", causing my father to blame my mother for feeding them. Rather than apologising or making an excuse, my mother hits back: '"*I* feed them," my mother said. "You think I didn't see you giving bread to those curlews last night? *You* stop feeding them."'

This is the punch line, the surprise, and it does two jobs. Firstly, it reveals that both my parents have been secretly feeding the birds and contributing to the noise problem, and secondly, the scene of my parents arguing about birds acts to undermine utopian ideals of nature as simply beautiful scenery; the more my parents admire and feed these animals, the more troublesome they become.

The next example, two paragraphs later, applies incongruity humour theory to reveal my childhood relationship with the natural world:

> 4/1/1992: Male koala moved into gumtree and grunted terrifying mating call all night. Had to sleep with window closed.

6/1/1992: Blue tongue lizard staggered into front yard. Looked unwell. Mum put it in a box and gave it a piece of sausage. Waiting to see if it will eat it.

7/1/1992: Tawny frog mouth owl flew into kitchen window and broke its neck. Mum buried it next to Clayton's guinea pig.

8/1/1992: Banjo found death adder in back yard, sat down and howled until Dad put it in a cardboard box and drove it over to Horseshoe Bay.

9/1/1992: Blue tongue lizard found dead in box. Failed to eat sausage. Buried between owl and guinea pig.

These diaries were part of a carefully thought-out plan to make David Attenborough fall in love with me.

Here we see the child's relationship with nature presented as a series of diary entries recording her interactions with and observations of the animals that live and die around her house. Again, these animals are not idealised but recorded clinically, without sentimentality or exaggeration. When they die there are no funerals, no tears shed or flowers laid. The reader sees the child protagonist as cold, detached from the lives around her. But this is a set-up for the surprise, the revelation that these entries are part of a larger plan "to make David Attenborough marry me." This plan is clearly absurd but this revelation works to overturn reader expectations on a deeper level by revealing that while the child lives closely with animals and sees them through a pragmatic lens, she idolises a man who idolises nature.

In pursuing this ideal (capturing a rainforest frog in order to draw it and attract the love of Attenborough) she encounters neither postcard scenes of the tropics, nor its unmitigated savagery. The family, trapped by flood waters, are taken in by John, a farmer recently abandoned by his wife. John's kangaroo beats him daily and the precious frog eventually dies. Boiled down in this way the narrative is entirely tragic, a state I have

attempted to avoid by amplifying the situation's absurdities and incongruities, notably, John's relationship with Benny.

Each character in this story sees nature as an ordinary, if sometimes bothersome part of life. To them, the environment they inhabit is not exotic or seductive or even particularly dangerous. John, after enduring one of Benny's beatings, does not get angry or complain as the reader expects. Instead, he says simply, "I don't mind, except when he gets me by surprise." When asked why he doesn't shoot Benny or have him removed by the National Parks service, the reader learns that John's wife raised Benny from a joey and is "attached to him"; John fears that if his wife were to return and find Benny gone she could be angry. The idea of a man willingly succumbing to the beatings of a kangaroo out of devotion to his absent wife is as absurd/surprising as it is tragic.

The premise of 'Spitting Distance' is incongruous: a woman who grew up on a small island has no idea how to fish. It then cuts back in time to the child Nicole. In this story the girl child, rather than aspiring to marry an older man, wants to *be* the men she sees pulling in marlins and barramundi on television. Again, this is incongruous, violating societal expectations of what an eight-year-old girl should desire. The story ends with the death of a parrot fish but narrowly avoids the tragedy form due to the narrative positioning of the child as quixotic and demanding. She imitates the TV fishermen, shouting 'strewth' into the bathroom mirror, "emphasising the 'rew'. It sound[s] tougher that way." She demands that her father take her fishing because "it's what dad's do," and, when he refuses, she implies that he is weak for getting upset seeing animals die in nature documentaries. She forces her mother, against her will, to take her fishing instead. In short, the child, with internalised notions of how nature should be treated, is obnoxious, full of blind faith and arrogance that she, despite having had no experience, will hook and land a potentially giant fish. The fact that it all goes horribly wrong is a tragedy for the fish, but the reader is invited to laugh at the foolish child

shocked and horrified by the reality of death. Here the child represents the ideal, sanitised television images of big game fishing encountering the reality of experience, highlighting the absurdity of simplified ideals of island living.

Both Astley and I, as second phase writers, have used humour to explore and dismantle the Scenic Special representations of the north by first phase humour writers but in vastly different ways. Astley's north, particularly in 'Ladies Need Only Apply', is painted as savage and fecund, a punishing place for the mocking, snobbish urban expatriate, whereas my treatment of the north is more domestic and normalised, focusing almost exclusively on the people who have already made the place their home. The environment is not unusual to the characters in my memoir, and yet the outside or tourist gaze is present and interrogated in both the works of Astley and myself. Astley treats Sadie's pre-formed outsider view of the tropics with dark irony; Leo and the environment strip her of her city pretentions, eventually driving her to the point of madness. Astley's tropical, regional environment is dramatic and extreme, a battleground, where in my work the outsider view or tourist gaze is internalised by the child. The child absorbs these views through television, and then acts them out, and needs to learn their inconsonance with her everyday, banal island living. The humour of *The Ocean is a Liar* is generated by the collision between the performance of the outsider views and the reality of experience. In this way I have worked to de-other and de-exoticise the north Queensland region by exposing the absurdity of the Scenic Special.

Conclusion

I began working on this conclusion under the belief that my creative work was finished. I had answered the research questions, I thought. My contribution to Australian writing was a work of humorous memoir as a counterpoint to the trend toward trauma writing in Australian memoir. I had, through experimentation, found a way to use humour as a tool to represent my family members sympathetically. Using the comic frame I had presented myself and my family as flawed, but as well-rounded characters. Central to this is the choice of a crucial scene in each story, a scene of benign conflict or crisis that is brought about by someone or something external to the family members represented. By identifying a crucial scene or scenes in each story, I was then able to impose a structure on each narrative and address the issues I had been struggling with in the first draft, in which I had unknowingly portrayed my characters as victims and villains by portraying them as agents responding to and reacting against each other. The best example of this, I believe, is 'To Have and to Hold.' There are no heroes or villains in this story, only flawed, fully human people reacting to and grappling with the external pressures of the flood and Benny, the kangaroo.

This restructuring to fit the comic frame also helped me work against the Scenic Special's exotic/othering regional representations of north Queensland as alien and unfamiliar. 'To Have and to Hold' is set firmly on north Queensland soil but I have consciously chosen to use minimal place detail to avoid exoticisation. The flood, red-eyed-tree-frog and kangaroo drive much of the narrative and the actions of the people represented, but they are not presented as particularly dangerous or exotic. To the central characters of the story, these things are simply the familiar, sometimes bothersome, constituents of the region. I have deliberately avoided setting up the environment as a character itself, choosing to describe the natural environment in broad strokes for the main purpose of locating the reader;

the place is visible but it is not foregrounded. When it is foregrounded, what is highlighted in my manuscript is the inconsonance between the childish Nicole who expects the fictional, outsider portrayal of her tropical island region to be real, and the developing Nicole overcoming her expectations. In this way I enlisted humour and the comic frame to present an alternative version of north Queensland, one that is more nuanced than the version many people see in holiday brochures or Bob Katter election rhetoric, one that presents my region as neither a coconut sunset, nor (to quote that episode of *Squinters*) "a fucked up place to go." That said, I did not whitewash the everyday experiences of bullying in school, or the occasional encounter with derelict characters. I did this to normalise these encounters – to show them from an "insider's" perspective of the region.

I had, through experimentation, answered my research questions and addressed a significant gap in Australian life-writing scholarship. I had also stumbled across a 'voice', a style, an approach that affords these ways of telling regional and family stories to others without betraying either. I had reached a point of enlightenment, I thought. I knew my work and I trusted that it did what I intended it to do.

Certainly, this manuscript so far has grappled with significant challenges in the portrayal of regional place and family in memoir, but that is not to say that the process of drafting to publishable standard is yet complete. As my recent experiences in the Hachette Manuscript Development Program have shown me, new research questions and issues have emerged. What is the narrative structure of this manuscript? Are the stories truly self-contained or is there an overall arc or plot that unites them as a coherent whole? I have gravitated to the picaresque as a way to deny or affront traditional structures of development including the bildungsroman and the künstlerroman, but challenges remain in making this manuscript readable and coherent to a broad outside audience.

It is with some consternation that I concede that while I might be at the end of my thesis journey, I am far from the end of my writing journey. I am at present working with a professional manuscript editor to get *The Ocean is a Liar* into shape for publisher submission. As of October, 2019, I have no idea what the next version of *The Ocean is a Liar* will look like but it is exciting to have a professional editor do some thinking for me for a while. I don't expect I'll ever see my own work with clear-eyed objectivity but, one day, when I learn to be comfortable with that, hopefully I will have reached my next point of enlightenment.

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Appendix A

Declaration of consent

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