

https://dspace.org/

# 'Treading Water' a contemporary novel, and 'Treading Water' reflective essay

**Brown, Katherine Anne**

**2009-09-22T10:27:54Z**
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7309

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

# ‘TREADING WATER’

## Reflective Essay

Katherine Anne Brown
Student No: 0343398

An essay submitted to the School of Literature and Language Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research).

Johannesburg, 2009

**Declaration**

I declare that this essay and the novel, 'Treading Water', are my own unaided work. They are submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Neither has been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____

Katherine Anne Brown

13th day of February 2009

## Acknowledgements

Both the novel, ‘Treading Water’, and contents of this essay were written under the very supportive guidance of my supervisor, Dr Elsie Cloete, and with the unflagging encouragement of my exacting friends Elspeth Kempe, Lesley Emanuel and Jane Fox. I am grateful to everyone who has provided constructive criticism on my writing, particularly the supervisors and participants of the MA writing workshops - and also to my husband, who was sensible enough not to criticise at all.

I am indebted to my sister, Toni Collins, who gave my project her backing despite the emotional pain it caused her.

# ‘Treading Water’ - Reflective Essay

## Contents


1 Introduction ..... 5
2 Communities of Practice ..... 7
2.1 Close/friendship group ..... 7
2.2 Informal writing group ..... 8
2.3 Academic writing group ..... 11
2.4 Readers ..... 14
3 Writing Process ..... 17
3.1 Creativity ..... 17
3.1.1 Research ..... 18
3.2 Writing and analysing the text ..... 19
3.2.1 Target audience ..... 20
3.2.2 Structure ..... 20
3.2.3 Characters ..... 21
3.2.4 Level of Detail and Pacing ..... 28
3.2.5 Sense of place ..... 30
3.2.6 Issue of ‘believability’ ..... 30
3.2.7 Writing to Deadlines ..... 30
3.2.8 Metaphor ..... 31
3.2.9 Ending ..... 32
3.3 Editing ..... 34
4 Conclusion ..... 35
5 Bibliography ..... 36

# 1 Introduction

I choose as my major work for this Masters in Arts to write a contemporary novel based on a real incident involving my half-sister. The two main characters in the novel are also half-sisters, living on opposite sides of the world, Bridget in South Africa and Alison in the United States of America. Following a fall that leaves Alison's legs paralysed, possibly permanently, Bridget puts her own life on hold and travels to Dallas from Johannesburg. The title of my novel, 'Treading Water', applies equally to both women, with one having to come to terms with a physical disability and the other with emotional issues in her past.

Writing is a personal process and varies from writer to writer but I believe it always contains certain elements, namely the creation of the idea, writing the text, analysis of the text and the editing of it. And I further believe these elements occur in various combinations in a 'loop' until the writer is either satisfied with his/her final work or runs out of time, interest, or inclination. While creation of a complete first draft behind a 'closed door' is not an option in this MA programme and might be anathema to many, I seek and implement feedback continually during the entire writing process, even at the point of creativity. Involvement with various individuals and groups is the way I have learnt to write and the way I chose to continue, so it is also the method around which I have structured this analysis of my writing process.

My first attempt at writing, as part of a writing partnership with a friend in London, was unsuccessful. We wrote the first draft of a novel by emailing back and forth, but issues of writing style and 'ownership' of the plot, as well as the lack of verbal communication, caused the project to flounder. I'd loved the process of writing that first draft and felt both the plot and characters we'd developed were good, but we had no-one to tell us why the text wasn't successful. My partner, a professor in the highly competitive and exacting field of molecular biology, was reluctant that we show the work to anyone until it was of a sufficiently high standard. In the process of attempting to reach that standard we probably threw away and re-wrote the length of another novel. I may not have developed many writing skills, but I certainly had a lot of practice.

Fortunately 'engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a *condition* for the effectiveness of learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991:93) and I was ready

to learn. Even this first unsuccessful attempt at writing had proved a good arena for the sharing of ideas on various aspects of writing. So the approach I took to learning was one where I could continue to share, to be part of a 'community of practice'. Wenger defines communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger 2008). I engaged with friends who were involved in writing and language and I joined a writer's group.

In an interview transcribed at the back of her book, Francine Prose says, 'Can talent be taught? I don't think so' (Prose 2006:10). King would agree if 'talent' applies only to great writers. He says 'while it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it *is* possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one' (King, 2000:160). If I had no faith in the latter I would not have embarked on this Master's programme. However, I do not think that creative writing can be taught in the traditional sense, but is an ongoing process achieved through learning and honing skills by practising the craft of writing. In addition, what has improved my writing is that, despite how painful criticism can be, I have gained enough confidence to seek it out. I've moved from the concept of criticism being 'the act or instance of making an unfavourable or severe judgement, comment etc' to it being 'the analysis or evaluation of a work of art, literature etc'[1].

I believe that different sites of critical discussion yield different qualities and types of insight into one's writing and these sites are more or less supportive depending on the power gradients in place, so I have analysed my writing process based on the communities of practice with which I have been involved. What intrigued me as a member of multiple communities is the strengths and weaknesses of each, their rules and structure for giving and receiving feedback, and above all, how I have benefited from each.

[1] Collins Concise English Dictionary.

# 2 Communities of Practice

## 2.1 Close/friendship group

For me, the solitariness of writing is offset by discussion and sharing. When issues of language usage were becoming a problem in my initial writing partnership I turned for support to a close friend with a strong academic background in English. She provided me with an invaluable service, not only by questioning why I was making various choices on vocabulary and sentence structure but as a source of interesting ideas and articles on language. She was always prepared to listen and to give information and suggestions rather than solutions, so while having total respect for her ability and ideas I never felt obligated to implement them.

Through this friend I became involved in another collaborative writing partnership, this time with someone who fortunately lives in the same city, so the issue of communicating only via emails was removed. This writing partner is truly talented, more creative than I am and less mundane in her approach; her characters far more unusual and their behaviour less predictable. I have frequently wondered what I bring to the partnership and decided it is, or used to be, a sense of task completion, and possibly more discipline. I certainly have to work at it far harder than she does. Despite our differences it has been an easy partnership, both of us willing to discard anything not mutually agreed upon. Neither the enjoyment of writing together nor our commitment to the project flagged. We stopped referring to each other by name and simply called each other 'Part'. When the woman through whom we'd met joined us for discussions and continued to be a constant source of academic information we called her 'Ac-Part'. I shall refer to both of them by these nicknames. I was referred to by both as 'Write-Part', which was very affirming and indicative of my relationship with them.

I wanted neither of these partners to read the text of 'Treading Water' until it was complete, but still had ongoing discussions with them on various aspects of writing.

## 2.2 Informal writing group

The writer's group I joined, in 2001, was run by Lionel Abrahams, 'novelist, poet, editor, critic, essayist, publisher and mentor to many[2]'. It was a weekly workshop for writers wanting to improve their craft, whether poetry or prose. The group had been in existence for many years and the meetings regular and ongoing. Writing was done alone and participants met with the deliberate purpose of sharing their writing and getting feedback on their texts, so it fulfilled all the requirements of a community of practice, and Abrahams was most decidedly the 'master craftsman' at the centre of it.

My academic background is in Computer Science and Mathematics and I work with numbers and logic. When I joined Abrahams' group I felt very much an 'outsider', an apprentice in the craft of working with words, and unsure whether I possessed the requisite skills and ability. Lave and Wenger define the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' which, they say, 'provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29). I had entered the group very much on the periphery but was immediately expected to participate in its activities.

Lave and Wenger remark that 'to begin with, newcomers' legitimate peripherality provides them with more than an "observational" lookout post: It crucially involves participation as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the "culture of practice"' (Lave and Wenger 1991:95). Abrahams definitely did not allow observation, other than on one's first visit. He encouraged regular attendance even if one did not bring a piece of writing each time. What was essential was to respond to other texts. Initially I was apprehensive of sharing my own work, but even more anxious at being expected to give feedback to others, many of whom were published poets and writers, some even award-winning ones. Yet all the writers attending the sessions were there precisely because they felt a piece of writing was flawed and wanted feedback on it. Lave and Wenger state that 'In apprenticeship opportunities for learning are, more often than not, given structure by work practices instead of by strongly asymmetrical master-apprentice relations. … It seems typical of apprenticeship that apprentices learn mostly in relation to other apprentices' (Lave and Wenger 1991:93) and this was certainly my experience. Not only was I being exposed to texts that worked and to those that didn't, *and* having to consider why they

[2] http://www.the-write-stuff.com.au/archives/vol-6/index.html, viewed January 2008.

succeeded or failed, but I had to *articulate* my reasons. But there were also occasions when inexperienced writers, 'apprentices' like myself, wrote sentences of prose or poems that succeeded well. As Abrahams' wife, Jane Fox, herself a novelist and poet and also a member of the group, put it, there were frequently 'bravo' as well as 'gulp-twitch' moments.

> When you hear someone read a piece every week or two, someone no better than you, and you see her come up with a passage that is terrific – but she's using the same old ingredients that she and you have been struggling with week after week – sometimes you learn more about how to improve your writing than you learn from clear explanations of what is wrong with it or good advice on how to fix it…. You are just listening and learning by ear.
>
> (Elbow 1981: 23)

Abrahams insisted that the emphasis of feedback be on the craft of writing, not plot - the 'how', not the 'what'. Content had to remain the domain of the writer. So comments tended to be primarily about your own response to the writing, about what worked particularly well or what was not clear. On a more detailed level, someone might point out errors of spelling, punctuation or repetitions, but this was often done with editing marks on the hard copy and handed back. When a response strayed to the content or became confrontational Abrahams, and later Fox, would intervene and bring the respondent back on track. Once he got to know the work of a particular member Abrahams would often direct these responses and he would always add his own astute and helpful observations at the end. So the feedback we received was honest and to the point, but tended to remain positive.

A major focus of Abrahams' group was reading work aloud. I found this effective for two different reasons. Until that time I'd read purely for pleasure and I read quickly. Francine Prose talks about the effectiveness of 'close' reading and for the writing group this was its equivalent. Since members of the writing group were encouraged to hand out hard copies of the text we were not only involved with close reading but at the same time listening to the author putting his/her own emphasis on the words. And in addition, soon after hearing the text, I heard other members of the group talk about what was successful or unsuccessful. This helped improve my own analytical skills. The other benefit was the 'attention I felt in the room as the others listened' (Prose 2006:2) or, in some cases, the acute awareness of when that attention was flagging.

Although the group had certain long-standing members there was also a continual change in membership and I benefitted from criticism from both long-standing members and newcomers. While I valued feedback from certain members more than others, I thought through whatever someone had to say and often found new members had a new and refreshing take. But *giving* criticism never seemed to get easier. Elbow says:

> Use the knife on other people's writing and you will learn quicker not only the outward techniques of good revising, but also the essential inner reaction that will lead you to those techniques. … Once you get comfortable wielding the knife and seeing blood on the floor, it turns out to be easier to turn the knife on yourself.
>
> (Elbow1981:123)

I cannot agree with him on this point. Yes, the process of turning the knife on yourself gets easier. I had started to internalise the feedback; as I formed sentences in my head I was already aware of possible reactions to them. But it has never become easier turning the knife on someone else.

One other unexpected benefit of ongoing participation that I experienced was the exposure to poetry. Engagement with poetry was certainly not out of choice. Initially I found the poetry being read, particularly if not yet honed, confusing and hoped desperately not to be called upon to comment. But I was never let off the hook and so was forced to consider word choices and search for underlying meaning. It has taken years to become comfortable with this aspect and I have only recently been able to write a few poems of my own and appreciate the satisfaction of expressing some deep personal emotion.

While I certainly *did* learn from other apprentices, there is also no doubt that Abrahams had a considerable effect on my writing style – he was very against authorial comment, 'don't tell me how to feel'. He was also an advocate of a 'sparse' writing style which I found suited me well. This was noted by a couple of the supervisors of the course – 'writing style pared down … terse, dry' and 'writing extraordinarily elegant'.

King believes each writer has a natural ability and you work your way to the top of your band (King 2000:159-160). By the time Abrahams died in 2004 I'd had short stories published, completed a first draft of a humorous plot-driven novel, and was engaged in writing a film script with Part. Fox continued the writing group at the

request of the members and although she hoped it would be more as a peer-to-peer group, and there was less 'power' at the centre, she nevertheless took over the role of 'master craftsman'.

It is now, in this group run by Fox, that I feel I have achieved a place in a wonderfully stimulating community of practice and am 'simultaneously performing in several roles – status subordinate, learning practitioner, sole responsible agents in minor parts of the performance, aspiring expert, and so forth – each implying a different sort of responsibility, a different set of role relations, and a different interactive involvement' (Lave and Wenger 1991:23).

## 2.3 Academic writing group

The structure making up the master-apprentice relationships was very different in the Wits MA writing workshops. Acceptance on the academic programme has strict criteria for entry and space is limited, so it naturally has a far less diverse membership than the informal evening workshops. Membership is also for an exact and limited period, so the structure of the group and workshops is very much more formal and 'apprentices' progress along a more fixed and regular path. 'The authority of masters and their involvement in apprenticeship varies dramatically across communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991:94) and here the 'masters' at the centre were strong academics. I have only first year English and since my reading has been of contemporary novels rather than classical literature, many of the writers and works referred to in discussions were unknown to me. Even the language and phrases being used were unfamiliar. So, despite being involved in the informal writing group for five years, I felt like an outsider, very much back on the periphery again.

If learning is moving 'toward[s] full participation in a community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991:116) then the structure of the MA group was more problematic for me than the structure of Abrahams' group. Within this academic group I was on a different journey; I had no aspiration to be part of the 'elite' and I knew I would never move towards that centre. Canagarajah refers to a 'pedagogical safe house'. Although this is applied to minority communities and 'coping strategies of African-American students' (Canagarajah 1997:173) I was in a minority in a group predominantly made up of people with strong qualifications in English, journalists and published authors and I did initially feel I was in a slightly 'threatening atmosphere' (Canagarajah 1997:174).

While I had a choice when and whether I could leave the informal group, the university had the power to pass or fail me, so it was, to a degree, an 'oppressive institution'. I had no sense of being in a 'safe house'. I felt unable to reject criticism, not only from the supervisors at the 'centre', but from the other participants as well. When one participant was adamant that I have no flashbacks, I wanted to eliminate flashbacks. When one of the supervisors said one of my main characters was unlikeable, I was desperate to make her likeable. And there were other moments when the criticism was, for a while at least, paralysing. I felt I *must* take the advice I was being given, yet remained unsure of how to implement what I was being told to 'fix'. I could relate to a comment such as 'writing what you know is boring – stretch yourself', but could see little application in my current project, feeling more and more that I wanted to cling to the 'realism' of what had actually happened around the incident I was writing about.

I was also finding it extremely difficult to give criticism. I could not provide the quality of feedback being given by others in the group and felt my opinions would have little relevance, for if I kept quiet someone else was bound to say the same thing in a more succinct and elegant manner. In the third episode of the BBC television series, 'Sensitive Skin', when one of the characters, a columnist, is asked to judge a book prize and is finding it difficult, his wife asks him why he doesn't just say what he thinks. He replies, 'Darling, darling, there are ways of saying what you think that make people think what you're thinking is more thoughtful than you actually think it is.' I wanted approval from the group – I wanted people to think I was thoughtful. I was aware that not only was our writing being criticised, but so was our feedback on the writing of others. And whereas the criticism I was receiving on my writing felt objective, when my criticism was rejected or questioned I felt it was much more personal. In one heated discussion one of the participants was left in no doubt that her dislike of the ending of someone else's work was 'unacceptable'. So the temptation to say nothing at all was strong. And for reasons of their own, other members of the group chose not to give feedback.

In sessions run by both Abrahams and Fox involving oneself with the work of others was not optional. Yet in this academic group reading the other texts and responding to them was voluntary and I found that surprising. A number of members participated only in receiving feedback and felt under no obligation to give it as well. In one or two cases members not only stopped participating but, in addition, seemed to reject feedback. So I questioned what the purpose of the workshops was for them. I also

wondered what other members, writers who were already skilled and experienced in the craft, needed from the programme. And yet one of the most accomplished of them all made the comment that the feedback he received was 'like a drink after a long, thirsty journey', which confirmed in my own mind that those not completely involved in the practices of the community, practices which certainly in my view included both giving and receiving feedback, were not getting the full benefit of what that community could offer. For despite the lack of involvement of some members the vitality of the community was amazing - and I was increasingly aware I was benefiting from it.

It was only on looking back over notes I'd made that I realised that, along with my own supervisor, there had been supportive members of the group all along. 'For improving your writing you need at least some people to be allies' (Elbow 1981:24). I *did* have allies but I had most decidedly been paying more attention to the negative feedback than the positive. Francine Prose says 'there's something essentially sadistic about the whole process … to sit there and have the love of your life –your work – just ripped apart by strangers' (Prose 2006:15). Maybe it is the word 'strangers' that is a clue. Members of the group felt less and less like strangers. We were getting to know each other though our work. And while those at the centre don't present their own work, the regular sessions and hearing their feedback on other people's texts and not only their insights on the writing process but the jokes and quips being made, certainly made them feel more and more like allies in what was proving to be a difficult task. So, although the criticism continued with comments such as 'something must happen' and 'relentless domesticity', I was able to keep writing what I knew I wanted to write. Francine Prose feels that euphemisms have sprung up with feedback around the 'inability to be honest' (Prose 2006:15). Certainly blatant honesty may be hard to take, but unless the feedback one is getting is honest, there is little point to getting it at all. It remains a critical part of interaction with a potential audience. Elbow says that 'getting feedback on an early draft usually means getting criticized before you've had a chance to make your piece as good as you can make it. But getting feedback on a final draft feels even worse because you are getting criticized for your very best work' (Elbow 1981:237). I felt I was in a position where I might not have been presenting my very best work, but then neither were the other participants. My work was as good as I was likely to make it given my own ability and the time constraints I was dealing with and, despite increasing problems with plot, I felt my writing style was getting better.

The change in feeling that the academic group was more of a ‘safe house’ than I had at first realised was most marked when the majority of the group returned for the second year. Until then the evening sessions with Fox, although no longer as regular as before, were still providing the sense of security and feeling of confidence I lacked in the more academic group, where contact outside the formal setting was limited. What was interesting, in that second year particularly, was to see that more members of the group were communicating via emails, in conversations walking out of the building, over a cigarette or coffee, or seeking feedback from selected members, i.e. constructing ‘safe houses’, which occurs more in tight, smaller groups. The group was finding ‘other ways to nurture such sites …. Small discussion groups, peer reviews and interactions’ (Canagarajah 1997:194).

There was another process taking place as well. Whereas in the informal group focus of discussions away from the ‘business’ of feedback might be the recommendation of a movie, theatre or novel, I started to appreciate the philosophy of writing that was emerging from the MA workshops, issues around writing being a process of both thinking and exploration, the nature of the contract between writer and reader. Safe houses ‘assure the healthy friction, challenge and debate that can contribute to the vitality of academic discourses’ (Canagarajah 1997:192). I could relax and listen to discussions on other texts relating to subjectivity without morality and morality without subjectivity. The ‘strongly asymmetrical master-apprentice relations’ were no longer of concern and gave me ‘a space of ‘benign community neglect’ in which to configure … (my) … own learning relations with other apprentices’ (Lave and Wenger 1991:93). For me it was an important step in the process of becoming a writer.

## 2.4 Readers

Elbow says that feedback begins with sharing one’s work with an audience and discusses various audiences for one’s writing, from those along the way to the final audience, the reader from whom one gets no feedback at all. He says ‘If you want to give the best gift possible to a writer give an audience.’ (Elbow 1981:180). So I was also keen to get feedback from readers who were not writers themselves, since they would be closer to my final audience. While readers do not form a community of practice I have included them in this section because they did respond to my work.

The most important reader for me, although she read the novel when it was little over half way, was my half-sister herself. We have different mothers and grew up in

different households, but I do think of her as my sister and will no longer refer to her in this text as my 'half' sister. Initially I thought the novel would work as a collaborative effort and she could write the chapters relevant to her, since she would be able to give an insight into a situation I could not possibly possess. She was enthusiastic about the idea, but felt she would not have the time to do the actual writing and suggested I write and she would comment. This was almost a year before I enrolled for the MA program. I sent her the first chapter, in which 'she' is left trapped on the toilet when her child removes the wheelchair. She phoned after a week, saying the chapter had taken her back to such a painful place she had gone into therapy and although she would be willing to read the story after completion she could not handle the emotion of reading it piecemeal. I abandoned the project and started work on something completely different. When considering a major work for the MA, however, I felt very strongly that this was still a story I wanted to tell. When my sister confirmed again she still had no objection to my writing the book, I did use her story, but with much trepidation, both as a result of her emotional reaction and the warnings following my proposal on the ethics and difficulties of writing about a family member.

My sister and her daughters visited South Africa in the middle of 2008, my second year on the programme, and while staying with me she requested to read the text, at that stage the narrative having reached the moment when Bridget drops the children off with their grandmother. After reading it she said she was able to get some distance from the story, but obviously could not separate her own actions from those of the character being portrayed – leaving her wondering, for example, about her own reaction when someone offered help. But she felt I was capturing the complexities of dealing with children while trying to cope with a disability and we discussed what kind of character would be appropriate for the grandmother. Her acceptance made a huge difference to my anxiety over what her reaction might be to the character I'd created based on her, and removed some of the inhibition I'd felt in writing those sections. So I completed the novel without asking her for further comment.

For the purposes of this submission I asked her to confirm she still had no objections to the story and she immediately sent the following email:

**From:** smuswim1@aol.com
**Sent:** 10 February 2009 15:37
**To:** kay-b@iafrica.com
**Subject:** Wits Project

To Whom It May Concern:

This email is to confirm that I, Toni Collins, am fully aware of the story being written by Kay Brown for her Wits assignment, parts of which are based on my experiences. Kay has my full permission to use any facts about me or my life in the creation of her story.

Thank you.

I'd shared my work with numerous writers during the entire writing process and on completion of a complete draft was keen to see the difference in response between those reading chapter by chapter and those reading it in its entirety. I gave the book to four family members, and three avid readers, two of whom I knew but who had never met any of my family, and another I had never met at all. All the family members were reserved in their feedback, saying they had found it a very hard thing to do. But nevertheless there was an interesting discrepancy in the responses. Most of the readers focussed on what they felt about the characters. The family members found it difficult to relate to Alison and stated the most probable cause was the inability to separate the character in the book from the actual person known to them. One, in particular, felt she could not develop a sense of 'fear' for the future of that character. In contrast, the readers who had never met my sister felt they related well to her. One positive aspect for me was that the women unknown to me who'd also read my first novel commented that the second novel was more 'discerning' and there was a very much better development of the characters, hopefully a sign that I have improved in that area.

The ending, missing the section beyond the scene at the Arboretum, was found by all bar one of them to be too abrupt. I have, in the meantime, added a further few pages to improve the conclusion.

# 3 Writing Process

## 3.1 Creativity

Creation of an idea is the first element of any writing process and probably the most personal. I have never thought of myself as a person with a highly active imagination and most of my work is based on incidents that have occurred. However, in her article on creativity, 'Looking for Inspiration', Phillips states that the 'only bit of the creative process we actually know about is the moment of insight, yet creative ideas and projects may incubate beyond our awareness for months or even years' (Phillips 2005:40). She also says that creativity has been shown to have two stages: inspiration and elaboration. I find inspiration in conversations, newspapers and snippets I hear on the radio. I have a passion for stories and am intrigued by relationships, so am not short of ideas. Elaboration is a more lengthy procedure. Phillips says it is further thought that 'part of creativity is a *conscious* (my italics) process of evaluating and analysing ideas' (Phillips 2005:42). For me the first step to beginning any piece of writing is the telling of an experience and seeing the interest it evokes. It is in conversations that I often realise when someone else is also finding an idea intriguing. Even at that early stage I am already seeking feedback.

This is what happened when I returned from Dallas. So many people wanted details of my sister's accident; how she fell, how she and her family were coping and what the long-term prognosis was, that I realised the rapid change in her situation and how she was coping with it was something a number of people wanted to hear about. It was the reaction of these people that created the idea of a novel based on what had happened to her. The inspiration was there but needed elaboration. Inspiration and elaboration require different levels of brain activity (Phillips 2005:40). Unfortunately I have never had the experience of any inspirational thought being followed by a complete piece of writing 'appearing' into my head, ready to be transcribed. Instead, the process is a long and laborious one. Particularly in the creation of a piece of writing the length of a novel there are many 'creative' moments necessary; the characters need to be created and developed, they have to have conversations, insights etc. It is an ongoing process of thinking creatively again and again. So what I found fascinating in Phillip's article was *when* one's mind might be in a more creative state.

‘Creativity comes to those who wait, but only to those who are happy to do so in a bit of a fog. … Change of mood state might be the key to triggering a creative event, rather than the negative mood itself’ (Phillips 2005:40). There is no doubt I find the ‘change of mood’ from sleeping to waking the moment at which I am most creative. If I can wake naturally in a quiet environment and have an opportunity to lie undisturbed with my thoughts I can create entire scenes and conversations in my head, which can then be saved into the word processor. I can also recall scenes already written word for word and edit them, still with my eyes closed. So on the occasions when I am battling with my normal workload I have tried to find such an environment where I can wake to that situation. The ideal writing environment for me has been to take Ac-Part with me, so these creative moments can be interspersed with stimulating discussions on language and characters. Hence one final aspect of Phillip’s article also struck a chord with me. ‘Creativity need not always be a solitary, tortured affair … scientific creativity and workplace creativity seem much more likely to occur when people are positive and buoyant’ (Phillips 2005:42). I believe this can and does extend to creative writing as well. For me the involvement in both the close friendship and the informal writing groups have been a constant source of both creative ideas and support in the process of elaborating them, for ‘to be truly creative you need strong social networks and trusting relationship, not just active neural networks’ (Phillips 2005:42).

### 3.1.1 Research

I have said that I write mainly from personal experience and there were specific incidents I felt necessary to include in the novel but felt unable to write about because I had no experience of them at all. While in Dallas I had never attended any sessions with my sister either with doctors or therapists and I felt totally unable to imagine the details of things like the setup of the therapy rooms and how testing of various sensations would be done. Fortunately I found a number of people willing to assist me.

The neurologist Michael Isaacs had examined my sister when she returned to South Africa after the accident and helped me a couple of times during the writing of the novel to get an understanding of the complexities of an injury such as hers. He also made me realise that it was impossible to predict the progression of the paralysis. What had in fact occurred with her injury was that she *did* walk again, aided only by braced shoes, but then regressed to the point that she will now most likely remain wheelchair bound for the rest of her life.

The physiotherapist Terry Rogan put me in contact with a former patient who had recovered from full paralysis below her neck and this patient spoke very openly about her own accident and the effect it had on not only herself but members of her family. What was interesting about that meeting was not so much her answers but what I learnt from preparing for them. Creating a list of questions to ask her on the reaction of her son, what had helped, whether she felt it had altered how others saw her, and how she saw them etc. gave structure to my own thought processes about the various aspects of immobility and the physical and emotional adjustments needed to cope. In addition, Rogan arranged for me to observe a couple of people involved in water therapy sessions under physiotherapist Rita Hen at the Netcare Rehabilitation Hospital in Auckland Park. Recently, when my sister visited again, I accompanied her to two sessions at a rehabilitation centre where she was being assisted to stand.

The only research I had intended to undertake and did not was attendance at a séance. I did try but was unable to find one where I would be welcome since I did not want to attend without making my purpose clear and they did not want attendance only for research purposes. By chance, though, my husband made contact with a woman who is herself a medium and he brought back sufficient details of the sessions to provide me with vivid detail - and he convinced me I did not need to attend in person. So I solved that problem by not having the character actually attend a séance either.

The information provided by all these people provided the 'elaboration' necessary to write the medical scenes.

## 3.2 Writing and analysing the text

Because of my involvement in a number of different communities of practice the processes of writing and analysing (and to some degree, editing) my manuscript were intertwined. I have chosen to highlight issues of these processes that resulted in feedback from both individuals and groups or, as was the case when writing chapter by chapter to meet deadlines, problems that occurred as a direct result of my involvement in the MA programme.

### 3.2.1 Target audience

While I will always consider Abrahams to have been the ideal mentor, it was his wife, novelist Jane Fox, a member of the group, who rapidly became what I consider my 'ideal reader'. She enjoys what I write but stays consistently demanding over how I write it. The other members of the informal group are also close to the readership whom I think likely to respond to my writing, predominantly white, middle-classed women - those likely to be intrigued by the situation the characters find themselves in precisely because it could happen to them. In one of the workshops Prof Titlestad said it is worthwhile considering 'which readers do you shed and when?' There is no doubt from the first few sessions that I would have shed a couple of the men in the group immediately.

I do think that any writer needs to be aware of their audience. What I feel more and more, though, is that I cannot write 'for' a target audience and am now able to write short pieces simply to express myself. Elbow talks about the dual activities of writing and sharing that writing and says that

> writing is more important than sharing your writing with readers; and sharing your writing with readers is more important than getting feedback from them. … Writing is what's most important. But when you can share and get feedback *without* hampering your writing, then you will benefit enormously from those two activities
>
> (Elbow 1981:238)

I do benefit enormously from sharing and receiving feedback but I am not sure, however, that the sharing process is still not more important to me than the writing. I like to share even very personal texts with an audience, no matter how small or intimate that audience may be. I doubt I will ever shake off the feeling that I write because I want my writing to be shared, but I also feel that sharing the *process* of writing with a different and smaller audience also brings me great pleasure.

### 3.2.2 Structure

When I first started writing, about seven years ago, I only wrote about things that had actually happened. I felt I couldn't deviate from the truth. It was only by getting feedback after reading my stories aloud that I realised how necessary it was to make choices - to find the focus of a story and omit events or conversations that weren't

relevant, swop the order of them – even make them up. I suspect this is an aspect of writing that gets easier all the time. And I think that how one structures the entire narrative, handling the order of events, insertion of dialogue and flashbacks, moments of 'interiority' etc. becomes part of one's writing style.

I found when writing a film script that the formal and rigid structure of scriptwriting suited me. It sat so comfortably with my background in computer programming. You intersperse statements of action with dialogue clearly labelled as belonging to specific characters. Yes, you have to guide the entire process with your words, but you can leave a certain amount to others; the actors must deal with the inner anxieties and conflicts and make the most of the sub-texts of their dialogue while the director has final say on pacing etc. But a novel is a very different beast. There are no actors and no director and no cameras focussing attention on close-ups. *All* of it has to be written and it is a complicated task.

There are proponents of the A-Z method of story-telling; start at the beginning and keep going in a straight line to the end. But I feel that thought processes are not linear and do not work like that. Something triggers a memory and one does have a 'flashback'. So after initially trying to crowd too much into the opening chapters, I relaxed and waited for the moments when the characters were most likely to dwell on their own memories of the past, when they were in their own quiet space, either lying together on the floor sharing wine or alone in the bath, kitchen or bed.

### 3.2.3 Characters

I prefer to have plot and character entirely interlinked although there are some writers who concentrate on only one of them. But I do agree when Henry James asks, 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illumination of character?[3]' One of the perennial debates in our writing group is whether one starts writing with either characters or a plot in mind. If a story is poorly written I might give up on it, but no matter how accomplished the language or believable the characters I feel disappointed if the storyline is inadequate or the plot has flaws.

I felt I had the start of a good storyline and I had *two* characters, one of them based on a close family member. I anticipated difficulties in swapping from one point of view to another and, with both of them being female, in handling the practicalities of

[3] *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*: *Partial Portraits* (1888) 'The Art of Fiction

the confusion of then using the words ‘she’ and ‘her’. But I rapidly ran into other issues as well, the most serious being that one of these characters – and sometimes both – were ‘not likeable’. So I have paid attention to each of these problems separately below.

#### 3.2.3.1 Writing about a family member

Gordimer says,

> It is beyond dispute that no character in fiction … is without connection with real persons experienced by the writer within contact of sight, sound and touch, or second-hand through experience recorded by others in one medium or another, and whether or not the writer is always aware of this.
>
> (Gordimer, 1995:4)

The circumstances that shaped one sister (Alison) were based on a real incident that happened to a real family member. The other sister (Bridget) was based on a girl I was at school with.

I was forewarned of the problems of writing about a family member when the MA group responded to my proposal. One issue was the ethical problem inherent in this. I said in my proposal I had made the choice to write a fictionalised story based on a family member and all I could do was write with as much sympathy and honesty as I could, which is what I have done. The other issue was the difficulty in creating her as a ‘fictionalised character.’ Although it was helpful to be forewarned, it certainly could not and did not resolve the difficulties. Perrine makes the observation that

> An author can tell us, if he wishes, exactly what is going on in a character’s mind and exactly what the character feels. In real life we can only guess at these inner thoughts and feelings from a person’s external behaviour, which may be designed to conceal what is going on inside.
>
> (Perrine 1959: 86)

I could never know what had gone on in my sister’s mind. I had seen her grappling with the emotional reaction of her young twins, the practical problems of being in a wheelchair and the dreadful uncertainty of the prognosis of her condition, and I could only imagine what her thoughts and feelings were. I was reluctant to assign her characteristics I wasn’t sure she had. Graham Greene says, ‘When I came to write I

was handing out alternative destinies to real people whom I encountered.[4]' I had planned an 'alternative destiny' for her. On top of the very real problem of her accident, I 'gave' her a lonely childhood and problematic marriage. There is no doubt I felt far freer imagining the life of my school friend, of whom I have heard nothing for nearly forty years. There were no constraints, no anxieties that someone might misconstrue a motive etc. But as the writing progressed I *had* to start making things up and gradually the character of 'Alison' became less and less my sister and more a fictitious character taking on an identity of her own.

But there was another side to it as well. If 'she' was my sister, then the other 'I' in the book must be me. When someone in the group asked whether this was so, I said 'most certainly not'. I had chosen character traits for that sister very different to my own. But when thinking about that question I realised there were certainly elements of myself in her. I grew up with the stresses of 'dislocated' relationships and when I wrote of the differences between a brother and a half-brother I was aware the emotions I was expressing might be hurtful to my own half-siblings. It made me realise I was not only writing about a family member, I was writing about *being* a family member.

#### 3.2.3.2 Unlikeable Characters

Fox, an advocate of character-driven novels, has frequently said you don't have to like the character, but you have to 'care what happens to them'. Prose, when asked precisely that question, i.e. 'Presumably, for a reader to make it through an entire novel, they have to care about the character – but not have to like them?' (Prose 2006:18), replies she doesn't know what one has to do. A comment from one of the academic group during our final session was 'I really like likeable characters' and I have to admit I do too – or at least I *do* have to care what happens to them. So a statement by one of the supervisors in the MA group during one of the first feedback sessions that Bridget 'couldn't be tolerated' for the entire novel was devastating. A participant of the MA group, who joined in the second year when my narrative had reached the half-way point, said ( in private at the end of the class, having stated she felt she couldn't say it during the session) she didn't like *either* of the characters, that even the sister in the wheelchair had come across as selfish. She asked to read the text from the beginning and her comments were very different once she'd done so. 'In terms of the sisters, I told you I didn't like them but my opinion has changed radically. I think my previous

[4] http://members.tripod.com/~greeneland/power.htm, viewed Apr 2007

attitude was formulated when tensions were building up between the two of them. My feelings then were really complimentary: evidence of your skill.'

She did express reservations about Alison, however ('can't quite fathom Alison out, although the narrative sometimes presents her perspective on the world') and felt the role of the children too prominent, but I was elated by her change of opinion and predominantly positive feedback. I felt I was gaining confidence and skill through the writing process and this feeling was being echoed by members of the informal group as well, evident in comments such as 'powerful writing gives new depth to B's character' and 'for the first time I felt they were real people'. There was open debate in the informal group as to whether Bridget was 'hard', some feeling that her lack of kindness to and jealousy of the stray dog showed she lacked compassion. Others again said, 'No, I didn't sense hardness. She felt lonely and needy' and 'she sees herself clearly and has regret – hence not hard.' It was wonderful listening to that debate. The pinnacle of feedback for me in both groups was when differences of opinions caused dissension.

#### 3.2.3.3 Point of view

Having two female protagonists created 'technical' issues of writing. The overuse of 'she' and 'her' could be eased in places by making more of the doctors and the first therapist male. But I still had a major problem with two completely different points of view and this was occasionally commented on with direct statements such as 'Point of view shifted a bit uncomfortably.' A comment made by one of the supervisors was that it 'feels like the women's two voices are competing to be heard … but I do note that both voices are equally established and each can stand on its own.' As the story progressed there were more comments about whose story it actually was and I became increasingly concerned that it was becoming Bridget's story about grief over her brother and her rushed marriage and that Alison wasn't being fully developed. By chapter ten I had comments such as 'I'd like to get more from Alison. Give her voice/views more instead of 'disabling' her'. By chapter thirteen, 'Alison's disability acts as a foil for Bridget's pain. Alison is still more chilled'. Towards the end of the novel the feedback from both groups on Alison's character was improving slightly, with the added advantage of her behaviour being less predictable. 'I loved A's reaction to kindness. She's bolshie and irrational.'

I've suffered the death of grandparents, but never the loss of a closer family member, so initially the believability of Bridget's emotional state over the loss of a

brother was of concern. Yet the majority of readers felt that they could relate more to her loss than Alison's and this both intrigued and worried me. I'd never felt the story could work entirely from only the one perspective as it would be too difficult then to get sufficient insight into both women. The intention was to have a contrast between the one being physically disabled and the other emotionally. (Although I had already blurred that distinction, giving the sister in the wheelchair the added emotional burdens of an adulterous husband and young children.) This was clearly expressed by a newcomer to the informal writing group, a young woman in her mid-twenties and hence someone I hoped would relate to the story. When she said, after hearing a single chapter, 'I liked that both sisters are disabled', I was delighted. Yes, I wanted them both to be 'crippled' in different ways, but I did want Alison's story to have equal if not more weight and that was not proving to be the case.

I discussed with a psychologist why, having not suffered the loss of someone nearly as close as a brother I could get into the head of the sister with emotional issues, yet could not accomplish the same with the one with loss of physicality. She pointed out that most people suffer both emotional and physical losses to varying degrees. With my parents divorcing when I was young, I could more easily tap into emotional loss. What she felt I needed to do is consider the physical loss that comes with aging – the weakening of eyesight and hearing, more aches in joints and muscles (and yes, I was starting to relate to all of that!) – to be able to start to understand the more catastrophic physical loss.

On the practicalities of writing with alternating viewpoints Fox gave me considerable advice. 'Get more into her head and you won't have a problem. Be absolutely sure who you are and where you are standing.' For example, when Alison is talking from a child's point of view, Fox said, she would be likely to think of her sister as 'Biddie' all the time. She applied this to another situation as well. When I had Alison slipping into the bath, I said, in her words, she'd 'flopped in like a walrus plunging sideways off the rocks'. Fox commented that the image was too considered; in that moment of panic she would be unlikely to consider it that way. So I retained the metaphor but altered the timing of it, having her state it afterwards, when she was safe and calm. Fox's criticisms on issues relating to the sisters extended to dialogue as well. While I generally had positive comments throughout about the believability of the dialogue, Fox was critical over the sisters' speech being too similar, saying that the dialogue needed to be more distinguished and a reader should be able to tell who is

talking without being told. Even the humour, she said, was always 'my' humour. I have been working at correcting this.

One last comment on having the two points of view is that moving from the one to the other caused problems with the transitions at the end of sections or characters. I had originally started by being very specific about the point of view and using the character's name as soon as possible. After a few chapters Fox advised, 'Don't be so specific about it – I want to work it out'. Others found this disconcerting and made comments like 'the transitions are rough … confusing in places'. In the end I tried to find a median way.

#### 3.2.3.4 Relationships between the sisters

My own sense of family relationships has been that there are issues between family members that cause tensions and irritations, but these seldom blow up into outright anger or antagonism. I wanted the sisters to have issues and realise them, but in a sense I wanted the sibling relationship to be realistic *and* I wanted it to triumph. In part the book was to be about the problems of family – not only between the sisters but with their husbands and children - and how the two women dealt with them while at the same time dealing with the much more serious concern of paralysis.

In the beginning of the story, judging by the response of both groups, I seemed to be getting the relationship between them realistic and believable. Chapter six elicited the comment that the 'relationships were more natural than anticipated, hence surprising.' Someone else commented on Bridget's 'helpless caring … inadvertently taking control and irritating'. Tension was 'present and never fully articulated' was another response and I found this heartening.

However, by the time I had written up to the middle of the novel there was more negativity in the academic than the informal group about the relationships and there were comments such as 'accomplished depiction of emotional shifts in domestic environment … [but] slightly claustrophobic'), and a growing impatience for something to happen. One of the supervisors stated it frankly, saying 'change in tone is emotionally bleaker and more honest, textured. The foundation work is done. Speed up'. There were members of the same group who continued to feel more positive about the work, saying it was a 'beautiful exploration of the complexity of family dynamics and emotions' and it seemed the informal group remained happier that there were changes taking place. They made remarks along the lines of 'the cracks are opening

slowly between them', 'I liked the companionship between them and the shifts from funny to dramatic', 'nicest bit of the story so far … levity, cork, avoiding touch, all works'. But even in this group the feeling of needing action was not far behind and by chapter twelve *everyone* was starting to feel the need for 'action'.

But just as the problems in the story of the relationships were becoming more and more interwoven with the problems of coping with the day to day activities, so too the problems of *writing* about the relationships were becoming interwoven with those of *writing* about the day to day activities. When the criticism first came up about the level of 'relentless domesticity' in my text a comment was also made about Wolfe's 'appalling narrative business of the realist: getting from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional.'[5] But the relentless pressure of bathing, feeding and clothing young children in that situation is precisely what I was trying to convey. The issue, however, is certainly relevant if it is the *narrative* that is appalling or boring. Getting from lunch to dinner when you have two young children and are in a wheelchair *is* an appalling business and interferes with being able to deal with other problems. As was becoming the norm, members of the academic group honed in on this precisely: 'Theme of tension between daily reality and massive personal disaster … depth of disaster doesn't emerge … day to day is trumping the disaster. Structure of the narrative is making it difficult to break through.' And in the same feedback session: 'it is an achievement to write narrative of everyday loaded with domestic detail … challenge lies in achieving balance between the two. There is enough of simmering tensions not to feel annoyed at the detail. They are feeling the way to new relationships. Not sure the catastrophe is obliterated, but editing should be guided by that awareness.'

So emerging from the relationship between the sisters was the necessity for Alison and her 'catastrophe' to assume a more prominent role. I did feel I needed to have more of a 'critical shift' against the backdrop of the ordinary, but it was the timing of that shift, or possibly more than one, that I needed to consider. I had intended this to happen when Alison wakes to find she can't move her head, but that was only towards the end of the novel and I was unsure how to increase any earlier the level of her anxiety, and that of the reader's on her behalf. So I continued to write according to my original plan and left the stiff neck and rush to the hospital where I had originally imagined it.

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/06/08/reviews/woolf-diary.html, viewed 10 Jan 08

Because the tension in the relationship and the details of the domestic activities are intricately connected I will discuss this further in the next section.

### 3.2.4 Level of Detail and Pacing

I only fully realised during the writing of this novel how closely these two items, detail and pacing, are linked. My first novel, work-shopped under Abrahams guidance, went at a cracking pace and Abrahams would often give the advice, 'to slow something down, stop and pay attention to detail.' The corollary however, would seem to apply to this work: if the pace is too slow, you are likely to have too much detail.

Of all the negative comments I received, the bulk of it related to the amount of detail, or that too much of it was 'mundane'. The writing of the novel and hence the time both groups took to read it was eighteen months. The final group of readers read the novel in a period closer to eighteen days and none made any mention of the overload of detail. But I obviously did not know that at the time of writing and the level of detail necessary concerned me deeply.

Advice on how much information you need to tell and in what way sounds practical and easy to implement. In November of 2007, when things were at their worst as far as my confidence in my own work was concerned, Fox's advice to a newcomer to the group was, 'Does it create atmosphere, advance the plot or expand the character? If not, leave it out!' I was getting similar advice from the academic group: 'You have to find the balance between boring readers and dwelling on detail.' It was exactly that balance I was battling to find and I felt clues to the solution would lie in the feedback I was receiving, so I gave the feedback on this issue more attention than feedback on any other.

What I also did, as Prose suggests, is focus on detail in the books I was reading. Ruth Rendell writing as Barbara Vine in her novel 'The Birthday Present' writes,

> He'd gone on the tube up to Paddington, but found when he got there that Warwick Avenue would have been the nearest station to William Cross Court in Rowley Place. He walked, aided by the London A-Z, over Brunels's bridge, through an underpass under the Westway and up into the genteel streets of Little Venice and Maida Vale.
>
> (Vine 2008:83)

Maybe using the London A-Z is an indication the main character was in an unfamiliar area of London. Maybe, since he returns to the building later in the novel, it

needs a certain setting, but did I need to know the details of his journey? I doubted it, yet this is a writer whose books I enjoy. How much detail one does like in a text no doubt varies from person to person, which is why different books and genres appeal to different people. I did wonder for a while if the level of detail 'tolerated' was gender-related, intuitively feeling that women, particularly with a novel in a domestic setting, would be more inclined to like detail. But this was not the case. On the contrary I had male members of the informal group who found the process of her anxiety over dressing 'fascinating' and 'loved the screenplay setting of each scene'. Another said, 'the realism is astounding … like lace'. And I had consistent approbation from male workshop members. 'It is womanly … intuitive, accumulating, gathering. The unsaid is poignant.'

Abraham Lincoln said 'you can't please all of the people all of the time' but that has never stopped me trying and I think this was realised by one of the supervisors who, following a difference of opinion during one of the feedback sessions, asked me whether I was going to take a poll! I haven't quite reached that point of desperation, and even though I am prepared to give most criticism careful consideration I *was* more likely to make changes where critics reached consensus on certain issues. Where there were occasional comments about minor and specific scenes I either left the original (as it was always motivated in the original writing) or gave more weight to the view of a particular critic. So, where Bridget watches a man walking down the road and one comment is, 'no relevance whatsoever … superfluous detail' and another is 'shows she's highly neurotic', which *was* the intention, I left the detail in. With the sisters' difference of opinion over Marmite and Bovril, I ignored 'too much detail … bit too much like prattle' and went with 'it gave a good glimpse into their past lives'. However, when a member of the MA group, someone I consider my 'finest' critic, said, with reference to Bridget standing in the kitchen with the towels she'd folded so carefully and thinking of her brother's funeral, 'There *are* amazing tensions, but at the end they are just fine … she opens the box and then closes it again … [you take] comfort in shutting stuff away. *Explore* the tensions', I did just that and feel that the tensions did build up during the following chapters.

### 3.2.5 Sense of place

There had been passing references in all discussions of the first chapters of the narrative to readers not yet having a sense of Dallas, but one MA participant was very specific about the lack of Dallas 'as a character'. He said there was a lot happening within the house but that the 'external world was not doing potentially what it could' and it would be interesting to contrast the internal and external. He himself had been to Dallas and found it both distinct and similar to South Africa and I was not making enough of that. There could be interesting connections on how Texas people intruded on the domestic bubble. This lack had been strongly influenced by my own experience. Both my sister and her daughters were in a state of trauma and between the daily chores and visits to hospitals and doctors and the therapy sessions I got very little sense of the Dallas itself. I found his comments interesting because it highlighted for me that the setting of the novel was that 'domestic bubble' and had very little to do with the city surrounding it. Starbucks and the Dallas Arboretum have little purpose other than to evoke images for Bridget relating to her sister's paralysis and thoughts over both the past and future.

### 3.2.6 Issue of 'believability'

Statements that 'Alison's injury seems a bit implausible to me' and 'she must surely have seen a neurologist' came as a complete surprise. It *did* happen and she *wasn't* referred to a neurologist until more than a month after her fall. But Fox has said on more than one occasion that just because it's true doesn't make it plausible. Then my sister herself expressed concern over this, aware that the progression of her paralysis was uncommon and her long-term diagnosis uncertain. So I raised the issue with both the neurologist and a doctor friend who has worked in the USA and they said that medicine there relies heavily on tests whereas medicine in South Africa is more patient-orientated. This strengthened the idea I'd had that the party needed a lawyer who raises the possibility of her suing for malpractice.

### 3.2.7 Writing to Deadlines

I respond well to deadlines. As they draw near I focus my energy and attention rather than panic. I work to a large number of deadlines in my own profession and had also become accustomed to producing work in time for the weekly evening workshops. But at that time I was either writing smaller pieces and could work on what suited my emotions that week, or was working on a plot-driven novel in which I simply didn't

have to handle emotions at all. While writing this manuscript I found I could not dictate my emotions to be in full sync with those of the characters in each consecutive chapter. In fact, the emotional space of the characters was often very much at odds with my own personal emotional space. I could well be up-beat at a time a character was low, or was feeling some other deep emotion very different to that of both characters. Particularly with Bridget, though, when an emotional issue in my own life coincided with a similar one in hers, I found a depth to my writing I had not discovered before. The section where Bridget is considering her relationship to a half-sibling followed a personal incident on just that and the writing of it was extremely difficult. But the feedback on it was tremendous: 'Emotion is gritty … sharp observations … weekend/weekday Justin hints at vistas of pain.' Maybe the difference in 'writing a novel' and 'being a novelist' lies in less of an incongruity between writing and personal space, in not having to meet work deadlines alongside writing deadlines and in being able to keep your attention more on the characters and their actions.

I did, however, feel considerable pressure writing for the deadlines for the MA workshops. One has very few sessions and I felt I couldn't waste them either by not having written enough or presenting work that was sub-standard. This was partly a matter of pride – I was receiving quite enough criticism as it was! – but also I'd become very aware that the quality of feedback was directly related to the quality of writing. If people had to comment on obvious and elementary mistakes time constraints meant they could not comment on more complex issues.

### 3.2.8 Metaphor

Robert Frost said, 'An idea is a feat of association, and the height of it is a good metaphor.[6]' I have used metaphors throughout the text and a number of them I consider successful, such as the feel of Daniel's kiss lingering like the touch of a cat's paw (p13) and the boy Luke flicking behind his father like a lizard behind a rock (p49). But there are comparisons that have deeper relevance, such as the comparison of a corkscrew to a gymnast (p85). It is Alison's own disability that results in the corkscrew being dysfunctional for her and not being able to use its 'body' to drag the cork out of the bottle. So the suggestion from a participant during an MA feedback session that I 'find and use an underlying metaphor' interested me.

[6] http://quotationsbook.com/quote/20086/

I'd recently written  a short story about a middle-aged woman who was 'up-rooted' and I used gardening not only as an activity that was important to her, but as an underlying metaphor for describing her emotions and relationship with her husband. I chose words like 'barren', blight', 'hacked-off limbs', 'maintenance' etc. The story was successful and published in the October 2007 edition of 'Woman & Home'. But with a work the length a novel I felt a single underlying metaphor throughout might be too forced. The title of 'Treading Water' was already a metaphor about the story. The narrative is very much about both women working hard to 'keep their heads above water', but not yet able to move on. So I was more explicit about that when I re-wrote the ending.

The other 'metaphor' that ran through the story was that of the masks. I had not used them deliberately as a metaphor and was dismayed that some responses from participants in the MA group suggested they carry too heavy a metaphorical weight. Their role in the narrative sprang from the fact that my brothers and I played with one as children and I felt it was a good prop to describe the relationship between the young sisters and their brother. The mask I remembered was of dark wood and indicative of what would appeal to Bridget and I wanted the one in the story chosen by her husband to be brighter and more cheerful, one that would instil a feeling of optimism. Fox commented that she 'liked Bridget's disillusionment over the masks … what was a sentimental marker and she now sees how gloomy they are', so the use of the masks was successful in that aspect.

### 3.2.9 Ending

I originally ended the story at the Dallas Arboretum when Alison rolls her wheelchair forward. I certainly didn't need any feedback to tell me that the ending was rushed. More than any other part of the text, this was written to meet a deadline, that of my final session with the MA group.

I sensed I was working *towards* the ending. There was more focus on Alison. The relationships had shifted so that there was more tension between her and her husband than between her and her sister. People liked her 'unsureness' of herself during the party and her hyper-awareness of things in the background, showing her growing need for emotional engagement with Tom and the power dynamics between them, and

commented on the subtle gradations of emotion and delicacy of engagement. But the ending itself was far too abrupt.

McKee makes a very clear distinction between a closed and open ending. He states that,

> A Story Climax of absolute, irreversible change that answers all questions raised by the telling and satisfies all audience emotion is a closed ending. A Story Climax that leaves a question or two unanswered and some emotion fulfilled is an open ending.
>
> (McKee 1997: 48)

In my narrative a closed ending is unrealistic (as is the case with most narratives) and would never end, as Fox puts it, 'happily into the sunset'. Alison's resolution seemed to me to be satisfactory and certainly satisfied a number of members of the informal group. ('Alison has reached a place where she admits she needs Tom … she needs emotional engagement' / 'self-sufficient – now able to be more dependent' / 'ending emotional and powerful') But I felt I had not sufficiently resolved Bridget's story. At least some of her questions needed to be answered, mainly whether she is now capable of engaging more fully with everyone around her or continuing to tread water herself. She has seen her sister as part of a family again, despite the difficulties that lie ahead for her. It seemed likely Bridget would consider her role in her own family. I felt at least she has to go back and *try*.

When I first read McKee's statement that Aristotle had said an ending must be both 'inevitable and unexpected' (McKee 1997:311) it puzzled me, but the climax of the movie 'Little Miss Sunshine' was perfect because it was precisely that. The girl dances a hitherto-unrevealed routine. Her routine is unexpected in that it's burlesque and humiliating, *and* precisely what her grandfather was likely to choreograph. And yet it draws the dysfunctional family closer together. 'Inevitable' does not mean predictable and 'unexpected' does not mean implausible. So I steered towards McKee's recommended ending without veering off to either the predictable or implausible and allowed Bridget to feel that she needed to leave her sister and return home early to deal with her own problems. I wanted to end on her awareness of the strong ties to her own husband and daughter and to feel them very keenly indeed.

## 3.3 Editing

Elbow makes the comment that, 'If you manage yourself right you won't have to revise until you have plenty to throw away'. When I first read his comment I found it disconcerting since I had written a *short* novel and thought I did not have much to throw away. But due to feedback I was continually receiving I realised I had not been 'throwing away' so much as constantly making changes as I wrote. I had developed not so much 'the critical consciousness that leads to good revising' (Elbow 1981:121), but a critical consciousness that was present during the actual *process* of writing. Even before I enter a sentence into the word processor I can imagine what various people would have to say about it and that acts as an initial filter. As Fox says in her '*Unserious villanelle dedicated to the Monday evening workshop'*

> 'Now hark,' said the Maestro – 'just do your own thing.
> 'To hell with the readers, it's *you* who must say
> 'if the line is no good and just doesn't sing
> 'you'll *hear* it going clunk instead of going ping.'
>
> (Fox 2008:43)

And since Elbow also says, 'The most trustworthy motive for revising is to make things work on readers' (Elbow 1981:122) and the result of feedback from readers indicated it was already a 'workable' text, I did not have much editing to do. A couple of the supervisors of the MA group gave warnings on the editing process along the lines of 'beware of taking out the 'soul' out of the writing' and I heeded their warning.

# 4 Conclusion

I find that returning to a piece of my own writing after a break of a couple of days, preferably even a couple of weeks, allows me to read it more critically. It is almost as if I am able to return to the text as a reader. And it is just this change of mode that is necessary with full participation in a writer's workshop. During the MA workshops a repeated assertion was that an understanding of writing comes from an interaction, a sharing of an experience, between the writer and the reader. And if this is the case then it is important that the writer fully appreciate how a reader will interpret his text. This is probably the area from which I benefited most through my involvement in various communities of practice. Reading of texts I might not otherwise have be exposed to and having to reflect on them in order to give feedback deepened my understanding of how the reader-writer interaction works and that understanding has improved my writing.

# 5 Bibliography


Canagarajah, S. (1997). Safe Houses in the Contact Zone: Coping Strategies of African-American Students in the Academy. *College Composition and Communication, 48*(2), 173-196.

Elbow, P, 1981. *Writing with Power.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Fox, J, 2008. *Ghost Writer.* Pietermaritzburg: Snailpress.

Gordimer, N, 1995. *Writing and Being.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

King, S, 2000. *On Writing. A Memoir of the Craft.* London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Lave, J & Wenger, E, 1991. *Situated Learning, Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

McKee, R, 1997. *Story.* New York: ReganBooks.

Perrine, L, 1959. *Story and Structure.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

Phillips, H, 2005. Looking for inspiration. *New Scientist, 188(2523),* 40-42.

Prose, F, 2006. *Reading Like a Writer.* New York: HarperCollins.

Vine, B, 2008. *The Birthday Present*, London: Viking.

Wenger, E, 2008. *'Communities of Practice', a Brief Introduction,* viewed Nov 2008, <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/>