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Beyond the snapshot: the elegant tracing of an emotional line in the writing of Anna: Three Fictions

Reflective Essay

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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 Creative Writing. Johannesburg, March 2012.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this essay and my manuscript for my novellas, *Anna: Three Fictions*, is my own work, both in concept and execution, and has not previously been submitted for a degree at the University of the Witwatersrand or at any other university.

Signed

Arja Maria Salafranca Migdale

June 12 2012

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Aims, rationale and genre considerations

The completed manuscript that makes up my thesis submission for my MA in Creative Writing is testimony to the mercurial, shifting nature of creativity and the creative process, as well as the way that genres, in fiction, blur meld and segue into one another. Comprising three fictions, the overall title for this MS is *Anna: three fictions.*

My final submission comprises two novellas – *Triangle* and *Déjà vu* and a short story, *Cul de Sacs.* And while *Triangle* can most certainly be categorised as a novella – at just under 40 000 words, *Déjà vu* at 12 563 words straddles a boundary between the long short story and a novella.

All this talk of word count – because there seems little other way of defining what constitutes a short story and a novella, except by looking at word length. Some writers and publishers label novellas as short novels when they are published, for example Richard Bausch's *Wives & Lovers: Three Short Novels* (2004). Both short stories and novellas stand in relation to the more distinguished and easily accepted from of the novel – which hardly needs to require a definition by readers, critics or writers themselves.

In my proposal I wrote that "In looking at definitions of the novella, the first point of contention is that few can agree on either a word limit for a novella, or even what a novella is. It is longer than a short story, it is shorter than a novel – but these bald statements tell us nothing. Starting with length: the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Nebula Awards define the novella as having a word count of between 17 500 and 40 000 words. The British magazine *The New Writer* holds an annual competition for prose and poetry, with provision for submission of a novella, and asks that entries of novellas or serials be no longer than 20 000 words. Meanwhile, in the introduction to *Transgressions,* a volume of ten novellas edited by crime writer Ed McBain, he writes, "a novella today can run anywhere from 10 000 to 40 000 words. Longer than a short story (5 000 words) but much shorter than a novel (at least 60 000 words)". (McBain, 2007: vii)

Other considerations of a novella are discussed by the science and fantasy writer Robert Silverberg in his introduction to *Sailing to Byzantium*, a collection of five novellas:

"The short novel – or 'novella' as it is often called – is one of the richest and most rewarding of literary forms. Spanning twenty to thirty thousand words, usually, it allows for more extended development of theme and character than does the short story, without making the elaborate structural demands of the full-length book. Thus it provides an intense, detailed exploration of its subject, providing to some degree both the concentrated focus of the short story and the broad scope of the novel. ..." (Silverberg, 2000: vii-viii)

My three works which make up my MS straddle the worlds of a novella or short novel. *Triangle*, the last chronologically, is a concentrated, intense focused look at one woman's obsession and refusal to let go of the past and thus firmly fits into the definition of a novella as quoted above.

The other two pieces are *Cul de Sacs* and *Déjà vu* – which are linked both in terms of the fact that the character of Anna appears in both (as she does in *Triangle,* of course) as well as the fact that both take place during weekends away on a farm in the north-western part of South Africa.

Thus all three stories are linked through a central character Anna – all are told in the third-person. In each piece we witness Anna at a certain point in her life – a defining moment, and moments of difficulty.

However, my original proposal is somewhat different to the final MS being presented. In my proposal I intended writing four novellas: *Triangle*, as well as novellas to be titled *Therapy, Polyamory* and *Cat*.

Therapy was to deal with a difficult therapeutic relationship between a beginning therapist and a client; while *Cat* was to be almost fantastical and fabulist in nature. Cat, the central character was to encounter her past and future selves when she wandered into the veld one day. This is a story that has interested me since the mid 1990s – and although I started writing this novella, I felt that it would be best suited to a longer more multi-dimensional work which

I have started planning as a novel. I would not have been confident in my abilities to plan and write a novel if I hadn't written Anna and the other novellas first. Thus the MA experience has directly fed into my confidence as a writer of the longer form as well as the short story and poetry.

As to *Therapy* although I wrote nearly 2 000 words of this piece, I felt that it wasn't quite going to gel or work as a novella. In the workshop process several people expressed concern at the difficulty of writing about the therapeutic process. While I agree that it presents difficulties – after all we're looking at a static situation of two people talking – I disagree that it cannot be written about adequately or presented successfully in fictional terms. Here I refer to two books that use therapy as fictional devices: Leon de Kock's *Bad Sex*, as well as Judith Rossner's *August*. In recent years the American TV series *In Treatment* also successfully looks at therapy, and is presented in a way that is engaging and dramatically interesting. However, although I have decided not to pursue this as a novella, I am still intending to write this up a short story, although it will be less intense and shorter in length.

Last year I completed the fourth novella, which dealt with the themes of polyamory and is titled *22 Blueberry Street,* and is a "true novella" in that the word length is just under 18 000 words. While pleased with this work of fiction, I am choosing not to include it in this MS, for reasons which I will explain when I go into further detail on the works that are being included. Instead I will include this novella in my second collection of short stories, which I am also currently working on, for future publication. (My debut collection of fiction, titled *The Thin Line*, was published by Modjaji Books in 2010.)

Thus, the MS, which forms my Creative Writing dissertation, contains only one piece which I proposed in my original proposal: *Triangle*. I did not have it in mind to write *Déjà vu,* which is a sequel to my earlier short story *Cul de Sacs* (first published online and in journals in 2002 and re-published in *The Thin Line*, my collection and due to appear in another anthology *The Best of Donga* in April this year.)

To explain why I have so departed from the original proposal requires an understanding of the themes of each piece. These are explained below. The order of the proposed stories is also below:

Cul de Sacs

This short story centres on a group of twentysomethings at the turn of the twentieth century. They are visiting a farm which belongs to the parents of Jake, one of the characters. Anna, now friends with Jake, was previously involved with him. The others are on the Easter weekend away are Ian and Danielle, who are a couple. The story revolves around their interactions, the relationship between Ian and Danielle, and Jake and Anna's now uneasy relationship as friends. She remains angry and yet also guilty about her relationship with him – a relationship she didn't want, and also subsequently ended after it had barely begun.

Themes of immigration are also explored – it's a time when many of their mutual friends are considering leaving the country or have left; Ian and Jake discuss their time in the apartheid army. The story is a portrait of people in their mid-twenties and their uncertainties and explorations of young adulthood, in a country going through violent change and experiencing a high crime rate and how that impacts on them.

However Anna is the central character and much of the action is filtered through her thoughts and opinion and point of view.

Déjà vu

This novella (12 500 words) returns the same characters to a weekend at the farm ten years after the weekend described in *Cul de Sacs.* There have been some changes of course. They are now in their late thirties and themes of ageing, resignation, being young parents, growing up are all prominent. Life changes you, some changes are welcome, some not. This is all part of living and getting older, of course. And there is some realisation of this. The group of people has recently reconnected after losing touch. Ian is no longer with Danielle; he is now married to Lisa and they have a young toddler, who is with them on this weekend.

Jake is now with Riana, a woman nearly twenty years older than he is. It is by no means the ideal relationship – Jake has settled, and it's a relationship of convenience and habit for both of them.

Anna is again the central character. She is single – but aware that time is passing; if she is to have children she must do it soon. She's at an uneasy crossroads at her life – remaining as conflicted as she was in *Cul de Sacs*, although time has passed and there is a maturity that wasn't there ten years ago, of course.

One more the relationships between all are explored; each becoming a mirror in some ways. Undercurrents of sexuality and wondering run through this as strongly as in *Cul de Sacs.*
In the end Anna and Jake come together again briefly; it's a betrayal of Rianna, and Anna is still as uninterested in him as ever, points are made, proved, the violence of their interaction is hinted at, yet we know now they will not come together again, they are still experimenting and playing with who they are.

Triangle

In the final section, and the longest at just under 40 000 words, Anna is now happily married to Leo, an architect. However, when the story opens he is away in Germany working for a number of months.

Anna, however, is still obsessed with a man she knew at twenty-three, Paul West. The relationship ended after nine months, and yet she has obsessed over him for years, has wondered where he ended up and how his life turned out. With Leo away, her obsession flares again, as it has over the years although it has always receded. She sets out to find him again, to find the "answers", to attempt a proper ending to the relationship, or perhaps a proper beginning. She finds Paul, now back in South Africa (he had returned to Canada where he had grown up), and now estranged from his wife. The wife does not want to return to Canada, wants to stay in SA – again the themes of immigration are (briefly) looked at.

The novella moves between this present and the past, looking at Anna and Paul's relationship all those years ago. It again explores the youthful concerns of early adulthood and its naivety

as well as the discord between Anna and Paul. Fate and destiny and whether one person is meant for you, soul mates, are another theme. This is a story of searching for the past and hoping that by returning to your past, some resolution may be found no matter how damaging to the present or the people involved – Leo and Anna's marriage at possible risk, for instance. Anna finds Paul, they begin an affair. She wants answers and she will receive them, unsatisfactory as they may be. She will also become pregnant with Paul's child, just as he decides to return to his estranged wife. The story ends with their second parting; Paul returns to his wife. Leo will return from Germany in a few days, Anna is just a few weeks' pregnant. The "early" birth can be attributed to being early, perhaps Leo will never know. Deceit and lies will follow her, or not. There is no indication that she will terminate the pregnancy; she will go on. Will she tell Leo? Even she herself doesn't know. Accepting the truth of course means accepting Anna with all her considerable imperfections.

Thus, through these three stories a portrait of the flawed Anna emerges – a layering achieved through these different tales. Rather than unpeeling the layers of an onion, the layers accumulate. This is not a novel of course – but by doing this a continuity is maintained such as occurs in a novel.

Anna in *Triangle* was originally named Alexia. While proof-reading the stories, it struck me that essentially all three characters were one and the same. My realisation that Alexia was in essence, the same character as that of the female protagonists in the other two stories: that is, a young woman struggling to ascertain her needs in a relationship and ultimately to achieve a sense of belonging and fulfilment.

They are all strongly autobiographical in tone – I have taken as the departure aspects and elements of my own life. But I have departed from my life to create fiction – Anna is, and is not me. Although the events of *Cul de Sacs* occurred and the farm described exists, I took the events beyond my own experiences.

Déjà vu is also wholly imagined. Again the characters are drawn from real life – but a second visit to the farm ten years later did not take place. The events are imagined, the relationships imagined. However once more I drew on some of my own thoughts and feelings and character to explore Anna's role.

And then *Triangle,* the final story, departs even more fully from my own autobiography. The past is my own; I was involved with a Paul character and I do draw from my own life in terms of autobiographical details. But I am not married, I am not looking for the man I was involved with and the present events of the story are an imaginary look at what would have happened, rather than an autobiographical rendering. I have always been fascinated by obsession and how a person can love one person, yet still long for a first love and how one can love more than one person and what can happen if you pursue your obsessions rather than playing the adult, or the good girl.

My decision to link these stories through the very obvious characterisation of Anna was inspired both by my re-reading of the pieces, and a realisation that Anna and Alexia were the same as well as my reading of the book of interlinked short stories, *Alice* by Judith Hermann. In *Alice,* Hermann uses the idea of linked short stories to explore the theme of loss. In a review for *The Sunday Independent*, I described the process and book thus: "In Alice Hermann examines the loss of a loved one through these five inter-linked short narratives. ... The central character of Alice seems ephemeral: she appears in each story, every death linked to her, whether a friend's husband is dying, or whether an old friend, a man in his seventies, is about to pass on. We get to know, and empathise, with Alice through the layering of these stories, like burrowing down deep into the text, until, by the final story, the one whose loss recounts a man central to Alice's existence, we feel we have, at last, become acquainted with the character who moves so centrally, so determinedly through these stories. It's gratifying, this slow peeling away at the onion skin of Alice, till at last, there's a sense of completion. Death is a character, a fact, early on, yet these stories are as much about loss as the central figure of Alice." (Salafranca, *The Sunday Independent*, January 22 2012).

In the same way I hope my MS presents a layering of the character of Anna. The story is not "complete" – there might yet be more stories about Anna or a continuation based on events beyond her and Leo and the pregnancy. However, Anna in the final story is complete in fictional terms. Anna has her ending; albeit an unhappy one in some ways. I liked too the way Anna will to continue to carry Paul in her through the child she will bear – it links in with Anna's flawed character and seems a fitting ending to her story.

A recurrent theme in all three stories is that of struggling against perceived failures in the past, and an obsession with either trying to undo the effects of the failures of the past, and somehow remould the outcomes. In *Triangle* this is attempted through Anna re-starting a relationship with Paul, the lover from the past. In *Déjà vu* there is a return to the farm visited over 10 years before and a replay of the same tensions and indecisions is explored in *Cul de Sacs.*

The Writing Process

I have kept journals since the age of eleven – these serve as both notebooks of the writing process, as well as telling the story of my life to myself. In the journals I think, discover, explore pose and sometimes answers questions. I explore themes relating to stories I want to tell and in many ways my journals are invaluable to my process of writing. In describing the process of writing I will be quoting from these journals.

Journals as an aid to writing and the creative process are an often recommended tool by writing teachers. They are said to be invaluable as places to reflect on your characters, to play with ideas, to think. My journals have served this purpose especially as I have written them in conjunction with the writing of my fiction.

As Robert Graham notes in *How To Write Fiction (And Think About It)*, he writes that his journal is a way of thinking about his fiction: "Unless and until I try to articulate these thoughts in writing, they are vague and unformed; they are only embryonic. But when i put them in writing [a journal], I find out what I am thinking. Thoughts are of limited use until they have been articulated. As EM Forster famously said, 'how do I know what I think until I see what I say?'" (Graham, 2007: 105)

Janet Burroway suggests keeping a journal as an aide to understanding your character. In her book, *Writing Fiction A Guide to Narrative Craft* she explains: "A journal lets you coax and explore without committing yourself to anything or anyone. It allows you to know everything about your character whether you use it or not. Before you put a character in a story, know how well that character sleeps. Know what the character eats for lunch and how much it

matters, what he buys and how the bills get paid, how she spends what we call working hours." (Burroway, 2003: 119)

Burroway further suggests that writers use journal to observe others: "Use the journal to note your observations of people. Try clustering your impressions of the library assistant who annoys you or the loner at the bar who intrigues you... Invent a reason for that harshness or that loneliness, invent a past." (Burroway, 2003: 119)

Meanwhile in *Dear Writer: Advice to aspiring authors,* Carmel Bird quotes from Anais Nin, one of the 20th century's most well known and prolific diarists, which summarises exactly what it is I have been doing with my journals. The quote from Nin is: "The people who turn to the diary are seeking themselves, the tracing of a route toward expansion and awareness, the road to creativity." Bird talks of journal writing as being "a kind of letter from yourself to yourself and is a perfect exercise for a writer of fiction." (Bird, 1988: 79)

Talking to yourself – it is exactly as I have characterised journal writing. On July 11 2010, I wrote in my journal after returning to the writing of *Triangle*: "And it also made me aware of how important my diary is to me. I make sense of my life by recording it, but my diary is also my gift to my future. It will always lead me back, show me the way back, and in this instance is also showed me the way forward. As both writer and human being I am tied to my diary. I am because of the habit of keeping one."

My journals have also served as a bridge to the past and an aide to memory. Memory is subjective, imperfect, bent and twisted by what has happened. This has been made clear to me by re-reading my past journals for research into the relationship described in *Triangle*. I have at times misremembered events, occasions, people, and while my narrative pieces are fiction, reaching into the past allowed me to re-create. As I noted also on July 11 2010: "I read into the past and so was again able to write in the present. I am loving the writing of *Triangle* because I am re-living the past, I am with Michael [the character on which I base Paul] again. But I'm also gaining another understanding of that past, seeing what really happened by reading properly about it. I carefully noted it all down. Sometimes the language is plain and not very beautiful, not very artistic, but it doesn't matter. I wanted to preserve

what was happening to me, and so I did, and I'm so thankful. Whatever the truth is, the facts as they happened are faithfully represented in my diary."

At times in the process of writing, I have wondered and railed against myself for writing so often and so long in my journals – this was precious, limited time that could have been devoted to fiction. However, once more, diary writing has led me out of guilt about that, as I explain to myself in my journal on February 13 2011 while also musing on the transmutation of life into fiction:

> And the diary writing: I mustn't be unkind to myself. It's my way of talking things through, with myself, thinking, making sense of everything that's happening – and it feels like a lot is happening in my life. So there's nothing wrong with this copious writing, it is what I am, and what I do. As long as I *do* write my fiction – because that is also what I want to do – and that I don't use my journaling as an excuse or a substitute for fiction.
>
> Fiction: that transmuting my experience into something else. Sometimes it's overtly autobiographical, sometimes there are only elements of my autobiography, but it is mostly transmutation, something else and other. A few exceptions: my stories 'Strangers/Friends'or 'Patterns' or 'Cul de Sacs' or 'Couple on the Beach', some others, rendered from life. But I suppose what I am trying to say is that it is fiction, because the *voice* used is the fictional voice. There's no mistaking the voice for memoir writing, even if the *facts* remain close to life.

I initially started writing of the MA by writing *Triangle* – the longest piece in the collection. As I have stated, I proposed writing four novella-length works. The reasons were two-fold. Firstly, the stories I proposed telling felt as though they were "longer" stories than short stories. However, they also weren't novels. They "felt" like something between a long short story or a novella.

In addition, I wanted to try my hand at longer works of fiction. I've written and published short stories, essays, journalism, and poetry, but have never had the confidence to try a longer

work of any sort, despite wanting to tell longer stories and having ideas for longer pieces, as the *Cat* piece presented itself (the story of the woman meeting her other selves).

When I started *Triangle* I had no idea how long the piece would eventually turn out to be – I thought perhaps maybe, 20 000 words. But from the beginning I immediately sensed the "breathing space" afforded by writing a longer piece.

Before I began writing *Triangle* I re-read my short story, 'Finally, a meeting' which was the forerunner to this piece. 'Finally, a meeting' was published as part of my collection *The Thin Line*. In this story the narrator imagines that she keeps seeing the lost lover – in Trafalgar Square in London, on a game lodge – wherever she goes she sees men who look like him, but are, in fact, not the lost lover. Until, one day, she does meet him.

I thought I had exhausted this theme – but the story of obsession kept on, well obsessing me. There was more to say – writing a longer piece would enable me to explore the central character's motivation in a way that a short story does not allow. As Graham writes in *How To Write Fiction (And Think About It)*, quoting Gardener, "'The chief beauty of a novella,' he argues, 'is its almost oriental purity, its elegant tracing of an emotional line... [It] moves through a series of small epiphanies or secondary climaxes to a much more firm conclusion.'

This comment resonates with what I was attempting in my novella *Triangle*. The story follows a very tight, insular world of the central characters, tracing the emotional line of Anna's doubting, questing and uncertainty. Both *Déjà vu* and *Cul de Sacs* take place within an equally insular environment of a farm, and with a close-knit set of characters.

Graham adds, "If you wish to write stories of 5 000 words and upwards, I think the extra length enables you to go beyond the snapshot, the distillation and produce a more extended effect, something a little closer to the prolonged exploration of character and more developed narrative of the novel. It gives you a little more space to stretch your legs, to flex your muscles, and in this space you may move your characters through a narrative, where you steadily build the tension towards the kind of climax and resolution more usually found in the novel. 'Many of the differences between writing short stories and writing a novel,' Ailsa Cox suggests, 'are related to questions of structure and pace.'" (Graham, 2007: 211)

When I started the writing of *Triangle*, in June 2009, I wrote in my journal that, "I can already feel the room to breathe that a longer piece affords you. I feel like there's room to stretch and expand into the story, characters, setting. It's so unlike a short story, yet not as daunting as I think I'd find a novel at this point."

I had already started writing the *Therapy* novella and commented, "My therapy novella at 1 800 words – and there's many more pages to go. With a short story I'd probably be reaching the halfway point at 2 500 words or so."

Continuing with *Triangle* in August 2009, I again delved into the differences between writing a longer work as compared to a short story, while commenting on the fleshing out of the characters. I wrote on the 23rd of that month that "I've spent the weekend putting flesh and bones and clothes on my imagined characters in *Triangle*, finding them jobs, matching hair colour and facial features to each. Creating, yet also reaching into the past to find these people. *Triangle* began life as that short story, 'Finally, a meeting' but the novella is very different to the short story. Not only in terms of length, although that is such a marker of difference, but in terms of pace, detail, connection, enlargement of character. In a short story you do not have to build character as you must in a larger piece, and you can write it in one session. There's not the same level of commitment either. Spend a weekend or even a couple of months on a short story and if it doesn't work, you haven't wasted much in terms of time or effort. There's so much more at stake with a longer piece."

Commitment, time, carrying on with the writing of a longer piece. At this point I was still part of the workshop process of the creative writing MA. This was a process that I had difficulty with almost from the beginning.

The Writing Workshop

There are some writers who thrive in this environment, who welcome feedback even before a work is finished. I found the process difficult from the beginning, and soon realised that I'm a writer who prefers to write a complete piece before submitting it for others' eyes and critique and comment. I found the process of having the eyes on the group almost watching as I

wrote, or so it felt, brought on doubt, and a sense of writer's block. I prefer, I found, to submit a work for critique after I have written it, after I am not so emotionally invested in the creation of that work. After it is written I am somewhat more divorced from it, more ready to cut, prune, throw out sections or excise pages (as I have done with the beginning pages of *Triangle*, which relate Leo's experiences in Germany.)

At my first submission of my novella – I presented three partial beginnings of *Therapy*, *Triangle*, and *Cat*. The negative comments directed toward *Therapy* and *Cat* when I first presented them were wounding in the extreme. In some ways I blame my abandonment of these novellas on my extreme sensitivity to the criticisms at this early stage.

From my journal, June 16 2009:

> My MA seminar on Friday. I presented 1 800 words of 'Therapy' the start of 1 000 words of *Cat* and the start I made on *Triangle* last year, with a bit added in last weekend. Most in the group felt they couldn't relate to *Therapy* still, they had expressed reservations during the proposal stage. And I'm not sure if that's because it's just not working or because I haven't gone far enough with the story. Elsie Cloete did comment that she found my line about the client's hand being cold and sliding out of the therapist's grip so evocative and telling of the woman's character and one of the finest descriptions she's read in literature. Leon de Kock spoke of my 'pointillist' approach, my exploration of minutiae, my careful yet spare attention to detail, words not wasted. He also said it was clear I was writing novellas, that I wasn't doing a whole big novel thing with plenty of characters and a whole big book.

At this stage it was useful to hear what the group was thinking of my writing and to hear that they thought my writing detailed and pointillist – which I hadn't been aware of previously. It is hard to take a step back and regard your own writing coldly and critically – even when a piece is finished there is still that emotional investment, although the editing of a piece means that in some ways you are forced to take a step back, to look at your words through a lens of criticism.

However, my difficulty with presenting an incomplete work to the group continued. Again on August 23 2009, the night before sending out another submission of *Triangle* I noted that I had written another 4 000 words of the novella:

> Yet, it's another partial submission. I am used to showing only completed work: whether it's an article or a short story or a poem, I feel incredibly uncomfortable at presenting, as it were, a half-baked pie, the crust isn't crisp, and the apples are hard. I'm also used to writing a piece in isolation, as it were, not knowing who the readers will be, or whether there will *be* readers.
>
> Some pieces are disregarded without being shown to others. But that's not the case with this work, or any of the other novellas. I'd like to present the finished pieces, I am a quick writer, but with this I'm dawdling, too conscious of the critical eyes that are going to look at it. The eyes of my fellow writers and supervisors, they have names and faces. It puts the brakes on the creative process, knowing who they are, and trying to anticipate their critical responses. I see them all before me, remembering that one objected to me describing blood as metallic and another complaining that the world of *Triangle* was too interior. My fictional world *is* very interior.
>
> Most writing is informed by our own opinions, facts, life experiences. Even pure fiction is nuanced by the writer's own views and ways of seeing things.
>
> But for now the problem is knowing who the readers are, knowing critical, if well meaning eyes, will be looking over intimate material.

My journals again served as an invaluable aid in the writing of *Triangle*. I was going back into my real past for this fictional work.

July 11 2010:

> With a deadline looming to submit to the MA group tomorrow, and the need to show something to my supervisor Leon de Kock, I picked up *Triangle* again. Once more, back into the past, back into 1995. Back into the past, I plunged into volume 26 of my

> diaries which records the time from May to November of that year. I read about the faltering relationship, the missteps taken.
>
> I read into the past and so was again able to write in the present. I'm also gaining another understanding of that past, seeing what really happened by reading properly about it. I read it all with such incredulousness. But mostly I read with a sense of gratitude, that I had captured it all so well and accurately that I could fall back on something more than memory.

The diary served as an entry point to the past – but it was both a jog to memory as well as catharsis. A way of exorcising the past while writing about it.

And then, in the middle of writing *Triangle,* I wrote *Déjà vu.* I had taken time off work to carry on working on *Triangle.* I find it essential to take leave in order to finish fiction at times, retreating into the fictional world requires time and commitment which isn't always offered in the daily routine and rush at deadlines and is another part of my process of writing.

Déjà vu was totally unplanned. For a number of years I had considered writing a sequel to *Cul de Sacs*. But I had never felt compelled to write it – I didn't "know" what had happened to these characters. But one morning while on leave the words "They returned" popped into my head and I knew I was going to be writing about Anna, Ian, Jake and their partners again.

On October 3 2010, I wrote in my journal:

> It's about the same group of people who go away, 10, 12 years later, back to Jake's farm. Anna/me I'm there again, alone while Jake is with Riana now and Ian is now married, not to Danielle, they broke up, but to Lisa, and they have a toddler. It's entirely imagined. In reality I know Alistair (the character on whom Ian is based) is married with a young child, but I haven't met his wife, and that's as far as reality goes.
>
> It was like going away for me, re-remembering the people, the farm. At one point I even had a flashback to sitting around the braai pit, eating my supper on a tray in the

> near dark, my fork feeling around the plate of food. I was back there, an actual memory. It's about growing older, the changes that happen in your thirties, the settling and some of the resignation. It's about Anna mostly, she's the focus of the story and as I wrote the end I thought how I want to plunder some of my diary entries, put even more of myself in there.
>
> It felt so liberating to write fiction again, to lose myself in there. It's like a fever on you, that need to write, the things happening as you sit, or lie on your bed, and you can't read, or ignore the impulse. You have to get it down, follow the story. On the Tuesday morning I woke up and the words, 'They returned' popped into my head. I knew who 'they' were. A friend, Gary, has long suggested that I write a sequel to *Cul de Sacs* but I never felt there was anything more to say. I still didn't – this came all quite spontaneously. I hadn't thought about writing this at all.

I did go on to "plunder" my diaries. I started writing Anna's diaries – contrasting the fictional world with her factual diaries, her own interiority. But I abandoned this idea as it wasn't working. *Déjà vu* was complete without this contrast, it didn't require more words, or a kind of self-conscious analysis of diary versus "fiction". The story stood on its own merits. The diary wasn't working. I felt this instinctively as I wrote; and I was convinced of this position when I went back to edit this piece.

In a sense this piece was a "gift" from the unconscious as some pieces are. Another example of the way in which the creative proves remains almost unexplainable. Some stories are planned and live in your head for years, others arrive almost fully formed, as this one did. I wrote it in a fever of two days – unable to do anything else. I said I was a quick writer and this piece of 14 000 words proved that, written in those two days, doing nothing else but writing, with the luxury of time on my side.

However, I had been reading Damon Galgut's three novellas *In a Strange Room* (2010) and had been struck by the fact that in these fictional works, the main character is also called Damon. In this Galgut was blurring the boundary between fiction and fact. Yet these pieces were billed as novellas, as fiction. The notion was liberating to me – so much of my fictional writing is plundered from life – although I often transmute that. Yet the inspiration is often

the people I have met and my own experiences. I wasn't daring even to rename my character from Anna and Alexia to Arja – although I had purposely chosen names that began with 'A' to mirror their own relationship to me. I needed that mirror, that connection.

In an interview I conducted with Galgut for *The Star's* books page I asked about his own fictional mirroring. I quote here from my interview in which he says:

> "All writers are drawing on their own lives to some extent, though of course some experiences sits closer to home than others. As I hope this book makes clear, I think the borders between fiction and non-fiction, imagination and "truth", are extremely porous. Sometimes there's no distinction at all." (Salafranca, *The Star*, October 14 2010)

Or sometimes the distinction blurs and mingles, as it does most especially in *Triangle* – in which I use my life to take off into fictional territory. I'm Anna, but I am not Anna. I'm not married, I'm not obsessively looking for the man I was involved with – but I understand Anna's impulse. Her desires are mine – but she acts on them. I do not.

In *Cul de Sacs*, I drew from life almost explicitly – the fictional details are present in the narrative details. We are not reading diary entries. But in *Déjà vu* we move into fictional territory entirely. Only the characters are based on real people – except for Lisa, Ian's wife. I have never met her – I imagine all the details. And this visit to the farm did not occur – as I have said – except in my own imaginings.

Work on *Triangle* continued throughout 2011 as I struggled to complete the work. By 2010 I had decided not to continue with the workshop process. It put the brakes on my creativity and felt damaging to it. I found it impossible to write these very personal details and subject both the fiction and my own life to this group I didn't know very well. One workshop participant even went as far as to ask if it was autobiographical, if I was the woman pursuing another. I felt the question was both out of place and naive and uncalled for. Although as I have explained the departure point was autobiographical, the actual narrative details were imagined.

The final MS of *Triangle* runs to just under 40 000 words. But by March of 2011 I was unsure how long it would be. I had originally thought I would be writing 20 000 words; then I thought perhaps 30 000, but the story demanded its own pace and considerations. This is yet another example of the fact that I am not a writer who plans and plots and that, so often a fictional work pans and veers off on its own path.

From March 22 2011:

> 1 700 words of *Triangle* written today. I'm into the 'present' now, and I need to explore the relationship between Alexia and Leo (the husband). She's surely in love with him? So why the obsession with Paul? I'm not so sure I understand it. The debate on whether you can love two people at the same time. Alexia and her friend, Megan, speak about this; Megan pooh-poohs the whole concept. I'm still not so sure that polyamory can be so easily dismissed. I think it can and does work for some. And even if you're *not* going the whole polyamory/sex route , I still think you *can* love two people in the same romantic way, even if you don't sexualise it. Love is big. It takes in the feelings you have for your children, your pets, your immediate family members, your partner, your friends. I think you can retain love for a past lover, while being married. Or am I naive, inexperienced? If you fall in love does that 'cancel' the others out, as falling in love is such a big, spectacular event, so overwhelming, so emotional, that it blots out everything, including any obsessive lust/fantasy/whatever that you might have felt for the other person? I don't know. But I do think that being consumed by the one person doesn't blot out the feelings you may have had for another. And in any case there's no 'rule' about this, what one person does or feels isn't what another feels. We are all different, and my character, Alexia, is still in love with the past, even as she moves through her present. That's who she is: absorbed, self-obsessive, perhaps slightly deranged, yes, something's holding her back, pulling her into the past. That's what I want to explore, that's partly what this story is about, in addition to exploring obsession, paranoia, how you can also destroy what you have and love when you go down that path, when you refuse to leave things alone.
>
> A 'longish' way still to go before *Triangle* is finished, it feels like another 10 000 words, or at least 5 000. I need to write about Leo and Alexia's relationship; then the

affair with Paul, and then the consequences. I want to give weight to it all, and I'm enjoying the breathing out you do when writing a longer piece.

The rest of the process of writing *Triangle* is explained in the following passages from my diary: I completed it in August and September 2011, taking three week's leave to complete as well as to write *22 Blueberry Street,* my novella on polyamory – which I will not describe further as it does not form part of the final MS.

June 26 2011:

Triangle. Paul and Alexia have met. She's driving home along the highway back to Johannesburg. What now? I feel a sense of anti-climax. Do I really need to go through it all: dinners and sex and then? Does she go through with it, an affair with Paul when she's so happily married, needing to see this through, or does she end it there? Not have the affair after all? No, she has to go through with it, for her own sake, she needs to put the past to rest. She needs to see too how obsession destroys. And she needs to see, yet again, that Paul does not love her, has never loved her, he's used her. A way to explore unrequited love, which is, of course, what this is also about. She needs to 'learn' a lesson. A part of me just hopes she doesn't destroy her marriage in the process, because what she has there is more real, more love than anything she could have ever have with Paul. Paul, newly separated from his wife, vulnerable, looking for something. He's as opportunistic as she is, she searching for her past, for something never quite found; he wanting affirmation after the seeming collapse of his marriage. But she will never, ever have him, and she has to finally learn that. While realising that despite her happy marriage to Leo, she will always feels something for Paul, the ex-lover. He will always be a presence, and that's something she has to accept, live with. Perhaps she even goes on to have children, a happy life – with age comes acceptance and resignation. She will 'settle' for less, accept what she has, or go quietly mad in the process. Those are the options. The lessons of maturity. If you want to save yourself, you accept some doors shut, that obsession creates a festering abscess. I want her to have a happy ending; all along I've imagined the destruction and chaos she will bring to her own life and that of others: Paul, Leo. But perhaps there is room for happiness; if she will only mature, accept.

August 24 2011

Two and a half thousand words written of *Triangle* today; yesterday another 2 000. The novella is now 32 000 words. Ten thousand words ago I thought I had maybe another ten to go; and now here I am again, saying, another ten thousand. At times I feel like it's becoming a novel. But a novel is at least 60 000 words, and I don't think I am only halfway through this. She's now met Paul a second time, for coffee, left confused, anxious, guilty? Runs to her best friend Megan, crying on her shoulder. And in some way I'm trying to stop her, pull back, halt it; but at the same time there's no stopping the trajectory of the story, putting on the brakes. It will go on, and Alexia will do what she must and needs to do. And part of me doesn't want to go there, doesn't want to see her cause all this mayhem and destruction. And am, in a way, dreading writing it. But at the same time I am *in* the story. I have to carry on writing it, I have to get to the end.

August 28 2011

Destiny? ... destiny to the rescue in *Triangle*. I devoured Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love* and then I had the answer as to why Alexia goes, again, for Paul. She believes he was the one, it was destiny, and they were meant to be together. A fortune teller once said that – and to me about Michael. She felt dead when it was over. Life was never the same again. That's why she's seemingly throwing away her life, her marriage, her supposed happiness. That stubborn hold and faith in destiny and fate. I've also never stopped believing that Michael and I were meant to be, but we couldn't get past our personalities – and this is why Alexia pursues this ill-fated relationship. She has to know. No amount of logical reasoning from friends or in her head can sway her. Even if she's wrong, she has to know. The fact that she has felt half alive all these years strengthens her argument, decision, resolve. She has never again bloomed as she did once, and so, in a way, she doesn't have anything left to lose. She lost it before. And if she loses again she returns to the half life she's lived up to now. She may be changed, yet again, by the experience, but perhaps, she still loses, or does she gain?

This novella was completed at the end of August 2011.

August 30 2011

I finished writing *Triangle* last night. When I sat down to write in the afternoon, I somehow knew I was going to finish it. I still had no idea how many words it was going to be – it was now in the late 30 000s, I'd written five thousand words the night before. But I ploughed back in, on, not looking back, not editing, not reworking. Just on, get it down. When I didn't know how the story would continue, how it would go on, I just trusted the characters, remembering what I had read in Julia Cameron's autobiography, *Floor Sample: A Creative Memoir* – to trust the process and to just *write.*

I know I have to say goodbye to *Triangle* at some point, to Paul, to Anna/Alexia, to me and Michael. And I held on. Plus, in some part of me, I didn't trust myself to finish, to write a longer piece. There were doubts throughout continually as I wrote. Was there not enough humour as Gerrit Olivier at Wits had once suggested? Was the main protagonist Anna/Alexia sympathetic, holding the story? Was this all believable, in fact? Can you love two people at the same time, and can that then cause you to do strange things, stupid things? Was the story too interior, too claustrophobic, as I'd once found two novellas by David Grossman, *Lovers and Strangers?*

And in among all the doubts the certainty of the need to carry on, whatever the outcome, I had to carry on writing, I had to finish. So I let the characters take me where they would. Paul and Alexia/Anna led me on, Paul was softer than I'd initially envisaged, Alexia/Anna so multi-faceted, so much still left unsaid. Even to herself. And then the delightful, unexpected thing: neither of the two endings I have envisioned happened. When I woke up yesterday morning I knew Alexia/Anna was pregnant. I had no idea when I started the story that she was going to end it pregnant, and preparing to go back to her husband Leo, rejected again by Paul and the circumstances of their life together, apart. I had no idea she was going to have the baby, raise it as Leo's. I envisioned chaos, madness, Leo finding out about the affair

> and Anna/Alexia learning about the chaos her obsession would cause in that way. Instead she will have to live with the consequences of her actions every day, forever. An equally powerful 'lesson', 'reminder' of her youthful passion.

The writing of *Cul de Sacs* in 1997 was an altogether different process. I started writing it as a commission for a book of South African short stories published overseas. The purpose of that anthology was to reveal what life was like in the 'new" South Africa for ordinary, everyday people. The piece was not accepted however.

A short story, originally over nearly 6 000 words, it first introduced the characters of Anna, Ian and Jake. Initially I struggled with the opening, but was aware at all times that I did not wish this to be a 'political' story, although set in the 'new' South Africa – a term that now seems extremely quaint. While writing and thinking about this story I had been reading two novels by South African authors that were to have an indirect influence on my thinking about this story: Jo-Anne Richards' debut, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1997) and Jenny Hobbs's *Thoughts in a Makeshift Mortuary* (1989). We were emerging from a time when fiction had to have a political message, when stories had to condemn the prevailing apartheid system. We wanted to read stories that were set in our own time and place but that were about ordinary people. The renaissance in South African publishing had not yet begun; this was a time before MA programmes in Creative Writing existed in this country; before the popularity of local fiction, before Margie Orford, Deon Meyer and other local practitioners of the crime genre. We were just beginning to tell our own stories freed from political messages.

As I wrote on June 16 1997:

> I think South Africans are hungry for stories set in and around this country. I'm not talking about political rhetoric type stories where plot is minimal because there's a point to prove, but simply ordinary stories about ordinary South Africans living, loving, growing going on with their daily lives. I believe the reason for the popularity of *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* and *Thoughts in a Makeshift Mortuary* is because these writers are fulfilling that need. We need more of this type of writing, more telling of the tales, the stories, and what it means to live here. In Richards' book politics does not play a major role, the social forces of apartheid and the inequality of

> the races back in the 1960s are present, but the narrative winds through these events, it's not *centred* on these events."

My own story was unformed in my mind. "I have only a vague idea centred on that weekend on Johan's farm, Alistair and Johan talking about the army, mouthing racist sentiments at times about affirmative action, the thoughts of emigrating. I've been toying with a sort-of novel idea about a group of twenty-somethings disillusioned with where SA is going, perhaps this is a chance to write a short story about it."

In August I was struggling with the opening of the story: August 5 1997:

> The problem is I have no beginning, no opening sentence that will lead me along. If that first sentence is right, the story hooks on naturally. I've thought of writing it in sketches: a night out at the Waterfront, a scene in Rosebank where Woolworths workers are currently striking, a snatch of a conversation in a car, guards outside banks, cafes, shops, department stores, the aggression in the air, drivers pulling in front of you, taking risks, almost causing accidents, the crime-frenzied city Johannesburg has become. That scenario seems a little like a poem or a series of journal entries.
>
> The other option is to perhaps write it from the perspectives of the four main characters. Set it in one place – a farm – but have each character have a say, so each section is different. Or: make it a reunion, see how things have changed for all of them. I don't want to make it too obvious, or political at all. I want it to be about this group of four people bumping along the dusty road, heading for a weekend on a farm, somewhere near the end of the century, bumping along in this funny country called South Africa. Begin it something like: four people are in a car, they are heading for a farm. And to have each character speak. It could get complicated though. Another idea: set it in diary form – my old favourite. But even that isn't right. It must be snatches of thoughts, feelings, emotions – nothing too weighty or obvious, not something that screams out, 'This is a story about the new South Africa!' Just ordinary people going about life, a weekend, living, working, getting to grips with their tumultuous twenties.

Here I can see so clearly how I used and have used my journal as a writer's notebook and a place to play out ideas.

Narrative Voice

In the end, the story was written in the third person omniscient narrative form, a form I would use for both *Triangle* and *Déjà vu.* Most of the action is filtered through Anna – but snatches of the other characters' thoughts come through – undiluted by Anna's filtering. A device that would not have worked if I had used first person, with Anna telling the story/stories. By doing this I was able to take a step back, to point out the faults and foibles of the characters. This is also why I believe that including diary entries from Anna in *Déjà vu* ultimately sounded false when I tried to do so.

The three novellas are all written in the present tense, although this was not originally so, with *Triangle* being written in the past tense. The use of the present tense adds to a sense of immediacy in the plots, and also invites the reader to follow the plot in a similar fashion to that of watching a film and being drawn in to the narrative as the story unfolds.

Conclusion

The final product is thus a series of three inter-linked fictions (one a short story, the other two novellas) which present jigsaw snapshots of Anna's life from her mid-twenties to her late thirties, cusp of her forties. They can properly be described as slice-of-life fragments in one sense, following the "plotless" lines of real life. I quote Stephen King in his book, *On Writing*, in which he states that, "I distrust plot for two reasons: first because our *lives* are largely plotless ... and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible." (King, 2000: 163). *Anna: Three Fictions* thus presents a layering of the character of Anna and the events that unfold in her life.

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