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The Death Of Bees and _Closed Doors_. Exploring the Impact of Experience and Trauma in Creative Writing.

Exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Ph.D. by Publication, University of Huddersfield, accompanied by hard copies of *The Death Of Bees* (2012) and *Closed Doors* (2013). I am the sole author of the above works.

Lisa O’Donnell, July 2018

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***The Death Of Bees* and *Closed Doors*. Exploring the Impact of Experience and Trauma in Creative Writing.**

ABSTRACT

A Ph.D. by publication comprising two of my books *The Death Of Bees* and *Closed Doors* exploring the impact of experience on creative writing practices and techniques used when writing from personal experience. The exegesis is accompanied by a reflective and critical examination aiming to analyze how authors creatively translate experience into their work.

Reflecting on my own creative process, I propose a critical inspection of the autobiographical and the personal influences that impacted the creation of various narrative personas behind *The Death Of Bees* and *Closed Doors*. Specifically, this thesis reveals the negotiation between real and fictive in order to preserve the truth. The exegesis will also look at how an experiential autoethnographic approach can raise awareness of key social and political issues through the invention of narrative derived from recognizable experiences.

In conclusion, I propose narrative persona is inextricably linked to personal experience in all my published work and this contention can be proved within the exegesis, meaningfully contributing to literary discussion regards creative techniques used by authors to translate the autobiographic in their creative work. This unique research and revelation reinvigorates the debate around the impact of creatively sharing trauma in fiction and the effect this has on the reader seeking authentic narratives reflecting a shared and universal experience.

INTRODUCTION

When I wrote *The Death Of Bees*, it was my intention to confront a trauma I had been running from my whole life. I had just become a mother when I began writing *The Death Of Bees*, and I was confused about being one, but I did not write *Bees* to exact power over anyone and certainly not my parents; I wrote it to empower myself. The same is true of *Closed Doors*. Both novels are first-person narratives told from the point of view of children and ripe with fiction, but the seeds sprouting the fiction were planted by my own personal experiences, and neither book would have flourished without those seeds. This is my contention. Though my novels possess their own formal logic, using an experiential autoethnographic process I contend within this exegesis that "The act of sharing stories helps us create a world that is more than the sum of its individual parts" (Jackson 2013: p. 58) that is, it is precisely the specificity of my individual experience interred in the text by the writer, and disinterred by the act of reading, that helps a wider readership identify with the experiences narrated.

In *The Death Of Bees*, we have two junkie parents dead in the garden, their teen daughters forced to bury them in the dead of winter, but that is not what *The Death Of Bees* is about, not when you analyse it. A burial at the hands of children in the opening pages certainly enabled a better hook and created the perfect jeopardy, but the reader is soon drawn from the buried parents, and within a few chapters they are focused instead on two neglected children and an elderly neighbour dying of loneliness and grief.

My readers are at the mercy of "entropy" (Rahimpoor, Edoyan and Hashimi 2011: p. 914 - 918) and a better view of humanity is exposed as a result, the reader is uncertain, but still roots for a sex offender saving the lives of two young girls, who may or may not have murdered their parents. Entropy is a technique I use in all my creative works to create the fictive distance I require to translate personal trauma better.

Samuel Beckett understood the power of chaos in fiction when revealing the story. He has been described as a writer who deliberately creates entropy "as the pavement for getting to that true self." (2011: p. 914 - 918) In many ways, I have employed the same discipline. Entropy is my best friend when writing novels, allowing me to better position myself in the realm of the story I am sharing. In both novels a chaotic dilemma is forced upon my character/s, a dilemma that will break a silence imposed on my protagonist/s by the adults in their lives. The turmoil in the world of my character/s is deliberate, permitting creative freedom for the author to speak confessionally and without fear of exposure. This devised chaos allows a fictive distance, but without risking detachment or threatening authenticity in any way. Turmoil helps me reach the truth with more impact; it also licenses a driven narrative that readers care about and without affecting believability. It is an imagined chaos I write, but it is not entirely imagined. I always know where the experience lies within the bones of the text, as this exegesis will reveal.

My need for discourse is cathartic, and the stories I choose to share are specific to experiences I have known. Obviously, I rely on memory to tell those stories, and that has not been easy for me. As Beckett observes in ‘The Expelled’:

> Memories are killing. So you must not think of certain things, of those who are dear to you, or rather you must think of them, but if you do there is the danger of finding them in your mind, little by little. (1946: p. 7)

This quote beautifully illustrates that memory can lead to truth “little by little” (1946: p. 7) and maybe not at all, but Beckett might also be noting the danger inherent in relying on memory entirely. Memory can lie, and it has the power to hurt and not just ourselves; it can hurt other people. We must take care when writing our fictions therefore. The memory I admit can be static at times and guilty of evading the truth at other times, but it does not have the power to dilute experience; rather it gives the author an opportunity to create narrative personas

revealing threads of where the author has been in life and what they have experienced. This leads to authentic storytelling and strengthens believability.

Marnie and Nellie in *The Death Bees* obviously narrate aspects of my own childhood, particularly the emotional duplicity I often felt and still feel towards my parents now buried in my fiction and unearthed by a comical dog. In *Closed Doors* Michael reveals my frustration with childhood secrets and the patriarchy. The experience exists, and there is a catharsis in writing those secrets, but the shame remains, and readers recognize it in the way I protect the parents in the narrative.

There is little doubt that *The Death Of Bees* is possessed of the fantastical in areas; for example, my parents are alive and living in Scotland. The same is true of *Closed Doors*: rapists never go to jail. But this thesis is an open and truthful account of what inspired such writings; it is a candid and honest exploration of why I write, which is dependent on personal experience.

I consider myself a contemporary scribe. I have a particular writing style, and the backdrop of working-class Scotland is not an accident. I explore social and political influences impacting the lives of my characters. I also write in the first-person, which presents me with the creative freedom to engage the truth of a world known to me, but I do not look to crowd the reader experience. The narrative personas are heightened in language, which ultimately creates a safe and intimate space for the reader to engage with difficult subjects like rape and child abuse. It is my view that their willingness to do so is dependent on authentic experiences presented to them in text through first-person narrative, so it feels like they are hearing a secret about experiences that cannot be written without an author who has known those experiences.

Writing has always been cathartic for me; my third book *Dandelions are not Weeds* is no different, the edit taking longer for this very reason. It is about a woman who thinks she is

dying, only to discover she is not. In the middle of writing my third novel however I discovered my own mother is dying. *Dandelions are not Weeds* is a story with a particular focus, the cycle of abuse within working-class families, an evolving mother-daughter relationship, forgiveness and the chance to start again with people you love. Interestingly it is a dual narrative, and my child protagonist in this novel is seemingly mute due to trauma. I felt this empowered the text even further; the child character observes her family internally giving her more freedom to consider what is going on around her. We also know she can talk. The adults around do not know this. The genesis has obviously changed since my mother's diagnosis, but instead of second-guessing her, I have been able to ask her directly about what it was like being a teen mother and how she feels about her grown daughters, now in their 40's with children of their own. Recently I asked her if she had any regrets and after a long puff on her fag she said, "I wish I'd left your dad sooner. When you were wee. I waited too long. I regret that. You both watched me love a bad man. I wish I'd shown you how to leave one." It is dialogue that belongs to Ava Christie now, a fictional character who will not die. It is a hideous coincidence my mother has a terminal illness. Life is definitely imitating art here, but the bones of the novel, like all narrative I create, is rich in personal experience, focusing specifically on the abuses at the hands of an abusive father.

Writing has always provided relief in my life, a therapy of sorts, but I know one's life cannot be empowered by the pen in entirety, though it is empowering to be able to confront life in this way and make sense of it where possible. It is, therefore, my contention that writing is a therapeutic force in my life and storytelling has allowed me to relieve myself of trauma, confront challenges in my life and "let them go" (Jackson 2013: p.122)

In many ways I fear I might vanish if I was unable to share stories, a terror better expressed by William James in his book *The Principles of Psychology:*

> If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke or minded what we did, but if every person we met "cut us dead" and acted as if were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us (Jackson 2013: p. 57)

Michael Jackson illuminates this fear of not existing further in his book *The Politics of Story Telling,* quoting Hannah Arendt who aptly reveals the anxiety experienced when one is forced to live silently: "Life without speech and without action…is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men." (2013: p. 57) Though letting go is "the reward of storytelling" (1973: p. 99) Jackson also notes stories are "a social act". (2013: p. 112) This is my intent and more deliberately in my third novel where I explore the cycle of abuse in the lives of women. In both *Closed Doors* and *The Death Of Bees*, I break many silences, and I agree the breaking of those silences is a social act raising awareness of key social issues like domestic abuse, rape and the neglect of children, which I feel helped me regain equilibrium in my life. For the first time in a long time I had control, "the imbalance between contingency and necessity redressed." (2013: p.112)

Reader reviews as evidenced in this thesis, confirm the power of sharing authentic stories, which resonate with their own experiences, especially in a novel like *Closed Doors*, exploring the impact of rape on women and society.

The choice to write about rape was obviously difficult, but choosing a first-person male narrator allowed me to protect confidences shared behind *Closed Doors*. I did not choose rape as a subject matter randomly, it always had a purpose for me, but I do not detail the rape itself; instead, I explore the aftermath of rape, which was essentially born of being a witness to recovery. As a result, I was better able to occupy the skin of Rosemary Murray, and she is believable, readers of the text unable to separate their life from the life of a persona I created in fiction. One reviewer gave me three stars on Goodreads because my work had triggered her.

She said she loved the novel, but my writing of Rosemary was too authentic and reminded her of what she had also survived.

Storytelling as a medium has allowed me and other authors, which will be evidenced in this thesis, to tell stories that have been shaped by their own unique experiences of life, often leading to literature that reflects those experiences. Though I can only explore my own motivation, I believe storytelling has helped me reframe trauma, giving me the objectivity and distance I needed to contextualize and survive it essentially. I do not write to evade myself, and I want to make that clear in the thesis, I write to make sense of myself, to unearth the past, confront it and like the narrative personas of Nelly and Marnie, bury it in the garden. In *The Politics of Storytelling*, Jackson says storytelling:

> "…allow people to unburden themselves of private griefs in a context of concerted activity; they bind people together in terms of meanings that are collectively hammered out. It is this sharing in the reliving of a tragedy, this sense of community in a common loss, that gives stories their power, not to forgive or redeem the past, but to unite the living in the simple affirmation that they exist, that they have survived." (2013: p. 112)

Storytelling without meaning and purpose renders me invisible as a writer and as a human being. There was a time in my life when silence was not the enemy. It "disengaged" (2013. p. 36) me from the past and for years, being silent felt protective, but when I became a parent the silence in my life created an obsession with the past and writing was the only way I could break free from it and find a better understanding of the life I have lived, the experiences that I have known and the family, for all their warts, that I have loved.

1. *THE DEATH OF BEES*

I can trace my love of writing back to a little girl aged eight in primary school being taught by a religious widow called Mrs. Wood. I wrote a story about a witch called Maggie who had a magic mouse. Together the witch and the mouse went on adventures, met a dragon and solved world problems. I was delighted by my effort but unsatisfied with its impact on the reader I ended my tale with the words "This is a true story." When I delivered my imagined genius to Mrs. Wood, she drew a line through my assertion I was telling a tale of truth.

“You can’t write that!” she said.

“Why not?” I demanded.

"Because your story is made up. It's fiction. Saying this is a true story is a lie, and we don't tell lies when writing stories, do we?"

In 1982 I went to live with my parents. Before that time my sister and I had lived with my maternal Grandmother and Grandfather. Until that point, my parents had had little to do with my sister and me. I was ten years old when my grandparents moved into retirement housing. My mother was fifteen when she became pregnant with me, and my father was seventeen. Essentially I grew up with two dysfunctional teenagers and it this experience which became the foundation of my first novel *The Death Of Bees.*

> You try not to think about it and pretend you are like everyone else who’s twelve, but deep down you know you’re not. You’re alone. You need to heat your own home and pay your own bills, wash your own clothes and dry your own tears (O’Donnell, 2013: p. 80)

The experiences of my childhood led to my first novel, and without those recalled experiences

I could not have written *The Death Of Bees*.

The Death Of Bees is a multi-narrative first-person account of a life experienced at the hands of neglectful parents. In both of my novels, I have elderly characters who parent my child protagonists, and the parents themselves are parented as my own were. In *The Death Of Bees*, Lennie, the gay neighbour, offers Marnie and Nelly a home when he realizes their parents' are absent. He saves them as my grandparents saved my sister and I. Lennie is very much based on my grandfather whose name was also Lennie. I added homosexuality to obscure the connection and created chaos around him to disguise the truth, as Beckett too employed it. Despite the entropy, the truth remained visible to my sister who read the first draft of *Bees* in 2009. "I don't know if you should write those things. They're hard to read," she said. Her note was an inspiration and a response to our shared trauma, which ultimately empowered the writing because it validated my pain. As Lamott argues, "You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better." (1980: p.6)

The Death Of Bees is told from the point of Marnie aged 15, Nelly aged 12 and Lennie aged 78. Originally I intended an epistolary novel, a diary written from Marnie's point of view, but epistolary writing constrained my voice, and I could not connect to *my truth;* as a result, I re-wrote everything in the first-person. It was the only way to reach narrative. In diary format, the persona of Marnie was limited, and I felt removed me from the text entirely. I wanted my authentic experience to live in the novel I was writing. It is ironic therefore that I began my tale with the death of my protagonist's parents':

> *Eugene Doyle. Born 19 June 1972. Died 17 December 2010 aged thirty-eight. Isabel Ann Macdonald. Born 24 May 1974.Died December 18th aged thirty-six.* (O'Donnell 2012: p. 1)

As an author I prefer writing in first-person, it allows me to lean on certain indexical behaviors contained within my narrative and get closer to a character. It also creates a better intimacy with readers. My background is in screenwriting. When I started writing novels the first-person was a natural fit. It enabled the writing of stronger, more distinctive voices in the narrative. Marnie's voice is Marnie's voice. In free indirect speech, there's a detached feel to voice, and I cannot get inside my characters head in the same way as I can with the first-person, the omniscient aspect of free indirect speech blocks me. It might be viewed a better point of view when looking to generate empathy because you can jump from character to character and enter all of them emotionally, and it definitely makes plotting easier, but my work is character driven and dependent on voice to share stories that are believable. As noted in the introduction, when writing *The Death Of Bees* the key to protecting the truth and writing authentic prose a reader trusts, is characters possessed of genuine feeling articulated in how they experience death, abuse, poverty, and social neglect. I felt a multi-narrative first-person approach allowed me to occupy the very skin of often misunderstood characters in life and characters with a desperate need to speak for themselves. The other motivation for the use of the first-person is that *The Death Of Bees* is set in Scotland and my characters are always Scottish. They are characters who belong to the lower working classes; they have a distinct phonetic accent; they are educationally dissimilar, depending on where they come from. They are also possessed of certain religious beliefs: Grammy is Catholic, but Robert T Macdonald is a protestant. Culturally, my characters exist in a world that is clearly identifiable socially and historically, and I can better communicate that in the first-person. I am also telling a story based on personal past experiences, and I need a vehicle that allows me to access those experiences authentically. Free indirect speech puts me on the outside of a story I want to be on the inside of. I can be more immediate with the reader in first-person; I can whisper them my secrets, make them part of the tale.

Writing from the point of view of children further empowered the text. As the author, I was able to wear my character's skin with ease, the shared experience making the story less difficult to write. I embraced familiar cultural and social whitewashes to explore difficult themes without alienating the reader who is always reminded these characters are children, no matter their actions. Younger characters create empathy in the reader. As Beckett's old man in "The Expelled" observes: "They never lynch children, babies, no matter what they do. They are whitewashed in advance." (1946: p. 38)

While my ostensible intention was to scrutinize my own parents, I do note the writing became a quest to understand why these little girls bore such neglect. I, therefore, placed my experiences and the experience of my own mother and father under a microscope, while exploring the kind of love these characters knew with one another. As a result it was often painful to write:

> That's when I get it, I'm crying for what should have been. It's not a picture of a family in my back pocket, it's a picture of something she never really wanted. We were something that happened to her and though she held our hands and kissed our foreheads and sometimes tucked us into our beds, there was always a beat in her eyes as if she was thinking 'What am I doing here?' and I know this because of the things she let happen to us. (O'Donnell 2012: p. 90)

Only a writer who has experienced the kind of toxicity that can exist in a dysfunctional family burdened by alcoholism can truly know the shape and form that dysfunction takes and translate it authentically, but I never focused on specific abuses. I did not have to. The abuse is real for readers because it is reliably conveyed in the behaviour of my characters. Marnie puts herself in dangerous sexual situations, and Nelly internalizes her shame by hating her body and

refusing to grow up. It is also meaningfully conveyed in both girls when they get upset at Lennie who openly condemns their parents for abandoning them.

> All things considered it obviously never occurred to me anyone could love such impossible things, how Marnie had loved them and how Nelly might have loved and perhaps had been loved in return, somewhere inside of them and somewhere forgotten. (O'Donnell 2012: p. 129)

Confronting the shame my child narrators experience in the text creates a believable and recognisable narrative for those readers who have experienced the same shame and for the reader who has not, it offers a realistic portrayal into the psyche of children who have endured abuse in their lives. Though Marnie and Nellie have buried their parents in the yard and are aware their parents are dead, when Lennie criticizes them, both girls remain loyal to Izzy and Gene. Though that loyalty may seem nonsensical, it is what enables both characters to disengage from the truth and deny the abuse at the hands of their parents.

I further this feeling of disbelief and denial in the title of the novel itself. Izzy and Gene are dead, the Bees are not, but Nelly's deliberate preoccupation with their extinction is a metaphor for what remains of life in the garden, and the silence forced upon children:

> The saleswoman in the Garden Centre said Lavender grows fastest and has a strong smell… Then she went on about how the honeybees were becoming extinct and how sad it was for the environment. Nelly was freaked by that and talked about nothing else for a week. Eventually I had to tell her to shut the fuck up about the bees… She stopped then, hasn't mentioned them since, but I know she still thinks about them. (O'Donnell 2012: p. 16)

Bessel Van Der Kolk says, “The greatest source of our suffering are the lies we tell ourselves.” (Van Der Kolk 2014: p.26) This is why it was doubly important to confront genuine feeling in the text because I do not lie about how my child narrators feel. It is why I require fictive distance and why Nelly has Asperger’s and talks like the Queen. Her voice provides the detachment I need to imply the abuses these girls have known in their lives without telling the reader too much. Nelly’s language is a device. Her speech can be evasive, and it can be vague, but it brings us closer to her story and without painful exposition:

> Perhaps Marnie has forgotten her own thirteenth year when Father called her a woman and followed her from room to room with daisies and gin. I have not forgotten for it is flawed to offer a teenager alcohol. It is forbidden. One can get into a great deal of trouble with the law for enticing a minor. Fortunately she didn’t drink any, but he did and a great deal if memory serves. Mother had fallen asleep and didn’t seem to care at all that evening, not even for Marnie who was forced to like daisies, a flower she doesn’t care for at all. (O’Donnell 2012: p. 120)

My unwillingness to demonize the parents of Marnie and Nelly is a recognisable burden in the lives of abused children; it is also my own personal acknowledgement of my own limits when it comes to understanding why my parents behaved as they did towards my sister and I. In this respect, I reached for my imagination, mostly because I did not want to identify my parents openly, but also because I cannot know their experience as teenage parents. As W. G. Sebald notes in an interview with James Woods:

> I think fiction writing which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator himself is a form of imposture which I find very, very difficult to take. Any authorial writing where the narrator sets himself up as stagehand and director and judge and

> executor in a text, I find somehow unacceptable. I cannot read books of this kind. (2008: p. 5)

In truth, my literary models have always been writers willing to expose their lives and their faces to their reader, openly exploring the worlds they have occupied. I am drawn to an author who can lean on voices they have known, revealing a wealth of life experience, sharing insights commanded by who they truly are as people and sharing with us the life they have lived. I applaud strong prose stemming from a willingness to be truthful, no matter the cost. I believe the writer should be courageous and always present in their work if I am to invest in their novel.

You could argue my experience might be better articulated in non-fiction, but creative writing is a more palatable force in my life bringing me infinitely closer to myself than an absolute truth could because I am a person who shies away from the brutality inherent in honesty because I still feel the shame of being poor and neglected by my parents. Fiction allows me to hide behind metaphor, ultimately permitting me to express my true feelings about my childhood and my parents without exposing them. As Atwood asserts “It's somewhat daunting to reflect that Hell is -- possibly -- the place where you are stuck in your own personal narrative forever, and Heaven is -- possibly -- the place where you can ditch it,and take up wisdom instead.” (2003: p. 36)

For me, writing non-fiction would be “hell” (2003: p.36) because I am unable to protect myself emotionally, which is why I do not write it. Fiction writing, on the other hand, is the embodiment of “heaven” (2003: p.36) for me because I am free to write what I want while exploring the value and meaning of my own life experiences and insights without frightening myself.

Lennie is written with W.G. Sebald's advice in mind. He is loosely based on my maternal grandfather. He takes to Marnie and Nelly immediately, offering them sanctuary by giving them food, care, and parental love. Lennie is gay. He is also a retired music teacher and on a sex offender's register. Months after his life partner Joseph dies Lennie receives oral sex in a park from a teen prostitute not realizing the boy is underage. He suffers harshly at the hands of his community as a result. Lennie is my Boo Radley. The comment I am essentially making is that strangers are not always the true monsters in the life of a child; sometimes the threat is closer to home, as observed by Marnie:

> He is deemed an inappropriate guardian, whereas my parents who neglected us every day of our waking lives were always deemed appropriate guardians on account of the DNA issue. No one wants to separate children from their parents, even when their parents are fucked-up delinquents. (2012: p. 244)

When my fictional Lennie narrates his chapters, he is always speaking to his ex-lover whose death he cannot get over. My maternal grandfather was the same. He never got over my grandmother's death, and after she died, he talked about her as if she was in the next room. As a technique, it was very powerful, and it created an immediate empathy for Lennie, a man on a sex offender register and a character I managed to persuade the *Daily Mail* to like.

It was draining writing *The Death Of Bees*. I was creating a fictive reality with personal truth, the art beginning in childhood while living with my parents. I was always editing their behaviour towards my sister and me, largely to survive it. The writing of *The Death Of Bees* empowered the child within me to bury her past, figuratively, but I still felt guilty writing *The Death Of Bees*, and the conflict is evident within the novel:

> In my head I kept seeing them, I could almost feel them…Gene reaching for a mug of tea and slurping it dry. Nelly nibbling at a biscuit and letting the crumbs fall between

> the pages of her book. I'm at the end of the bed, picking at a scab formed after a fall. Izzy gives me shit for it, but I tell her to fuck off, it's just a knee. It feels like a loving time, a better time and it should comfort me, but it doesn't. (O'Donnell 2012: p. 88)

In a comforting quote by Anne Lamott, she advises writers to confront their truths and own their pasts if they wish to write powerful, authentic prose, which clearly requires an author's presence in their own text:

> If your childhood was less than ideal, you may have been raised thinking that if you told the truth about what really went on in your family, a long bony white finger would emerge from a cloud and point to you, while a chilling voice thundered, "We *told* you not to tell." But that was then. Just put down on paper everything you can remember now about your parents and siblings and relatives and neighbors, and we will deal with libel later on. (Lamott 1980: p. 21)

Nana Lou in *The Death Of Bees* possesses shades of both my maternal and paternal grandmother/s. Nana Lou is a controlling religious mother like my father's mother. Robert T MacDonald, Izzy's father in *Bees*, is a tyrant, but not based on either of my grandfathers; he is loosely moulded on my maternal grandmother, who like Robert T Macdonald, was a recovering alcoholic while raising me, but not when she raised my mother. Instead, my mother was raised by a frighteningly abusive mother who drank night and day. In *The Death Of Bees*, I deliberately transpose the persona of my grandmother into a man because of my loyalty to my grandmother. Despite her faults in my mother's childhood, she stopped drinking and saved my sister and I. In many ways I think this was difficult for my mother because she did not parent her own children and neglected them cruelly. Identifying my grandmother within my novel still felt like a betrayal, and so I created R T Macdonald, perhaps to remain loyal to my mother, by making a vain attempt to tell her truths also.

Fictionalizing my grandmother made it easier to the write the book; it permitted a conscious process within the role of author. I needed fiction, some untruth, some lies to create the objectivity I needed to write about the various childhood abuses my sister and I had personally experienced, but I have thrown in abuses I know my mother suffered too. It is no accident she chose an alcoholic to spend her life with. Trauma bonding is powerful in the lives of the women in my family and something I am exploring in my third book, *Dandelions are not Weeds*

I also fictionalised my sister in *The Death Of Bees*. In real life my sister Helen had a lisp growing up. My grandmother lectured her day and night until my sister's accent became a bizarre hybrid of a small child and landed gentry. She often affected this accent for approval from the grown-ups around her, using words like "Tchaikovsky" and "Constantinople." When writing the novel, it became an effective device. As mentioned Nelly in *Bees* has Asperger's, and like my own sister, she speaks like a lady; it gave the character her own unique narrative voice and more of an edge. The character of Nelly also possesses a repetitiveness in her speech, which became part of her idiosyncratic style and acts as an effective marker for the reader. She also has incredibly short monologues. For example, chapter six titled *Nelly,* is four sentences long. First-person allows for this kind of creative styling. The reader is always privy to the secrets of all three characters in a well-paced present-tense first-person connection to the text. What Marnie will not tell us, Nelly will:

> My father, a loathsome, malignant type of a fellow, sat me on his lap in the night-time. Said he loved me. Later I find him spent, stagnant, unclean, crumpled on an unmade bed. I find my pillow by his head and good golly Marnie had pushed it over his face. (2012: p.23)

It was in editing I struggled. Fiction though protective can sometimes feel disloyal. When Katherine Mansfield considered her own position in literature she was not clear who was

writing sometimes: "True to oneself? Which self?" (Feenstra 2010: p. 1) She observes the life of the author as an ever-evolving force, her spirit changing over time, her politics and personality altering with every new tide. In other words, the author who wrote *The Death Of Bees* might not be the same author who wrote *Closed Doors (*Morrow 1993: p. 11)

As Mansfield observes in her own work, people change, and naturally, those changes alter their perception *(*Morrow 1993: p. 11), but Mansfield believed we still maintain an evolved self in the prose we write, reflecting memories specific to who we are. If anything, my memory produces a stronger imprint of the child I was, the places I have experienced and the people I have known.

Though I acknowledge the unreliability of memory in replicating the truth when creating fiction, the fiction I employ I feel confronts *my truths*. For example, Marnie is altogether separate from me as a person, but her creation evolved out of personal influences and experiences which shaped the character I decided to give her. She is not possessed of my voice as a teenager: her personality is essentially the abstract voice of my mother as I imagined it to be and based on her voice as I remember it growing up; the autobiography imbued in Marnie's voice obviously deviates, but as explained, only to get closer to my own story. I address this complexity of truth-telling within the novel itself when Marnie says: "Telling the truth doesn't matter to a stranger for he knows little and can judge nothing." (2012: p. 111)

Obviously, my parents are very much alive. I was not sexually promiscuous growing up, neither was my mother. My sister does not have Asperger's and my father never sexually abused either of us, but he physically abused us and he emotionally abused us. Even where the story is imagined, it still cannot be told without personal experiences. It is what drives the narrative, in other words, you cannot escape the experience or the world. I simply created a

fictive distance between myself and the biographical details of my life. As Stephen King states “Fiction is the truth inside the lie” (2000: p. 19)

The shape of my own personal world has given rise to all kinds of characters evidenced in *The Death Of Bees*, but also in *Closed Doors*. Perhaps the characters I have created are unrecognisable to the people I have based those characters upon, but the bones of myself, the bones of my sister and the bones of my parents are clearly identifiable to me, my sister and my mother because the author knows the context of the text, and so do the real characters who were involved because without it the story cannot exist. My father’s promiscuity, for example, his alcoholism, the physical and emotional abuses tolerated by my sister and me, are heightened in Gene, a drug addict, a thief, a sexually impotent man gravitating towards the weak and vulnerable. Izzy is co-dependent and facilitates his addiction. And this was true of my own mother. In Marnie, I reveal my mother's frustrations as a human being, but also my authorial forgiveness of her because my father abused her also. Izzy’s father Robert T Macdonald is a vague representation of my grandmother’s tyrannical alcoholic self. While Lennie is the embodiment of both my grandparents. He is a gay man who gives Nelly and Marnie a home, he also gives them love and ultimately a future. Lennie also asserts my own personal motto that people cannot be who you want them to be; they can not be who any of us wants them to be because we are here in this life to love impossible people, not possible people, like parents who abuse us and lovers who ignore us.

For obvious reasons this story was not easy to share and why humour is an important ally in my writing. Humour allows me to deflect and create an emotional distance when engaging the past. It also conceives a bond between the reader and the text. In short, humour makes the story less intimidating. No reader wants to be lectured on the welfare state or sex crime in contemporary Britain unless there is a comedy dog or a witty teenager at hand to relieve the

tension. Humour also makes Marnie more likeable and gives her a very particular voice; she is abrasive, but she can make the reader laugh:

> Dessert is served with coffee, except it's not coffee, it's espresso, and like their daft tea, it's served in egg cups. I decide to get Kirkland a huge fuck-off mug for Christmas to dwarf all these tiny wee dishes his mum's got. Fiona gives me a huge slice of cake but remains unable to mask her discomfort, basically she wants me to fuck off and never come back and is totally shitting it in case I drag her son off to Sighthill and start injecting him with heroin. (2012: p. 244)

In truth Marnie is named after an elusive Hitchcock blonde who reminded me of my mother, though Marnie in the novel is a brunette, as I was growing up. She is an intelligent girl, but co-dependent and she may be a comedian, but her humour is dark. It is Marnie who introduces the reader to her parents in the prologue. And it is Marnie who asserts her lack of care for them; though we discover the opposite is true:

> Today is Christmas Eve. Today is my birthday. Today I am fifteen. Today I buried my parents in the backyard. Neither of them were beloved. (2012: p. 1)

The dead parents are presented metaphorically and literally in the novel; their death allowing for compassionate reflection creating empathy and understanding in the reader. It also permitted protection for my protagonists who can reveal, without fear of injury, the pain caused by their parents' neglect.

The Death Of Bees is essentially an urban fairytale and fairytales rely on unforgettable chaos or entropy. I have written a book about two kids left alone in a council house to fend for themselves, but like Hansel and Gretel, my protagonists, Marnie and Nellie survive their monsters because they are not passive child narrators. They challenge the world they are

immersed in. Though trapped socially and economically in their situation, they believe they can exact change because one of my child narrators thinks she is an adult and for a time the reader forgets she is not. With the help of her younger sister they bury their parents in the garden, and when Marnie is 16 they decide they will move elsewhere, forget they had parents. This is obviously a fantasy, but the kind of fantasy only a child would consider as a viable course of action, and it drives narrative. It is not a strong plot, not by any stretch of the imagination, but the reader does not care, because they are invested in voice and willing to suspend disbelief.

There is a knowing in the text, a truth to be discovered and a world readers are intrigued by and might know. Obviously the reader is at liberty to interpret their own meaning from the texts I write, and I have no desire to remove that freedom, but the reader's interpretations exist because there is something vivid and traceable in my shared story that sometimes resembles or reflect their own and that is also empowering for the reader and writer. As one reader responded:

> I grew up in Taiwan with a miserable childhood that affected my adult life a great deal. I am in my 40's now and still trying to come to terms with it…thank you, for saying what I believe a lot of children with the same experience wanted to say but had no voice. (Joe Chen, Translator, China)

Arendt notes "the presence of others who hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves" (Jackson 2013: p. 73) It has mattered therefore, that the stories I have chosen to share are universal in theme and relevant to others. This need to share influenced voice in my work and why first-person is my preferred point of view, permitting a voice the reader can be intimate with.

There are two ending to *The Death Of Bees:* the one I wrote and the one Random House urged me to write. In my original ending, the girls flee. They never confront their parents' dead bodies and leave questions instead of answers. I realize now I wrote such an ending because this is how I essentially felt. I had unearthed what my past was, but at that time I remained unable to articulate how to resolve it in my head. Random House wanted safety for Marnie and Nelly, and the only secret that remains is one that saves them. The fictional sisters return to Firemore in Loch Marie to Lennie's clandestine holiday home in the wood with a bag of money, the bones of their parents far behind them:

> Birds keep chirping, and music keeps playing. Life continues as another life ebbs away. We have seen death before, Marnie and I, a mountain of ice melting over time, drops of water freezing at your core reminding you every day of that which has vanished, but the despair we know today is a sadness sailing sorrow through every bone and knuckle. There is no moment in which we say goodbye, there is no finality as he slips into peacefulness, he simply leaves us, and though I seek courage when he passes I am weakened by tears, but I must hide them for he leaves us a lie to conceal, a lie he sent to save us. (2012: p. 256)

In truth, the secrets forced upon me as a child created the writer I became, for better or worse. The silence behind the closed doors of my childhood always made me feel powerless, but with a pen in my hand I was no longer at the mercy of my parents' lies.

2. CLOSED DOORS

Closed Doors in comparison to *The Death Of Bees* is set in my hometown and told from the point of view of an eleven-year-old boy Michael. In other words, within *Closed Doors* the author can also be found, albeit on a surface level. When analyzing the subject of this novel I personally experienced the value of perceived identity as interpreted by the reader. One reader asked for a picture of me and another reader wrote me a letter about a rape she had gone through, reaching out to a writer she believed had been raped also. I have been sexually harassed/ assaulted, but never raped. I have supported friends who have been raped, and that was not easy, but much of their experience is written into the character of Rosemary defining how she evolved within the text.

Women fear rape, but I was careful not to make a spectacle of the subject matter or dilute Rosemary's experience or the issue of sexual assault. To that end Rosemary does not narrate her own story; I felt it more empowering for me to observe things from a child's perspective. The lens of a child alters societal views of what sexual abuse is or is not. Giving the lens a male voice further illuminated the violence. Her story might have been too brutal coming directly from Rosemary, who was the rape victim. Her son Michael witnesses the aftermath of rape and his relationship to the victim (who is his mother) creates an intimate and devastating portrayal of a heinous crime told from the first-person point of view of a pre-teen who we meet in the first page gazing at a female neighbour; the object of his affection and the core of his moral dilemma when she is also raped.

It was not difficult to write Rosemary; as mentioned, I have supported friends who have been raped. I looked to their experiences, which I too observed through a lens. Michael as a narrator allowed me to recreate the distance I knew from listening to friends who had gone through the

worst thing a person can experience. Their will is torn from them. He voices my own naivety in many respects. I was only 19 when a friend of mine confessed to being raped by two men she knew. The aftermath for her was life-altering. She changed her entire personality. Her clothes. Her musical tastes. She also cut her hair and dyed it purple. In *Closed Doors* Michael's father Brian observes a similar change in his wife:

> She's erasing who she was. She's pretending what happened to her happened to someone else and not the woman with the blonde cropped hair. (O'Donnell 2013: p 51)

In *Closed Doors*, I write a character who is raped, but who pretends to her son she was flashed at and forces him to keep it a secret, a secret with dire consequences for the community when another woman is raped on the Island.

The sexual assaults that took place in *Closed Doors* occurred in the 1980's. This is the period when I first went to live with my parents. I needed a male character the reader would believe, a reliable narrator who was likeable and easy to empathise with, someone who would make the reader laugh, someone who was smart enough to recognise the seriousness of his mother's attack, and someone who could combine his newly acquired experience from the standpoint of innocence. I needed to retain a certain objectivity and tell a story that didn't lecture or alienate the reader because the subject matter was so tough. Michael has to manage sensitive information, which he receives without corruption because it is the 1980's and social media isn't the force it is now in influencing the male gaze. When he is confronted by the moral dilemma inherent in keeping his mother's attack a secret, he reflects the true horror of rape, revealed when he finds Louisa Connors:

> It's just a few steps to Miss Connors. She is lying on her side, her face swollen and bleeding, her clothes savaged by the same dog who savaged at my ma's clothes. I lay

> my jacket across her breasts. I know what I am looking at. (O'Donnell 2013: p. 119)

Using an eleven-year-old boy also enables me to employ uncomplicated sentences, which are psychologically less burdensome on the reader. I found these gave me more freedom to discuss the consequences of rape on society, without obvious authorial direction. In other words, Michael is always present as a narrator, and in every scene, the reader always knows what Michael knows and as a narrator he provides me with an effective voice that conceals and downplays the 'author' voice so I can communicate my feelings and opinions on sexual assault without intruding on the story or the reader who might view the intrusion as finger-wagging and judgement.

There is, however, duplicity in writing novels, I accept that. Margaret Atwood in *Negotiating With The Dead* notes it effectively as a Jekyll and Hyde phenomena, a persona inside the mind of every writer. (2003: p. 26) and, quoting Matthew 6: 3-4, she explains this division thus:

> But when thou doest alms, let not the left hand know that thy right hand doeth; That thine alms may be in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly Matthew 6: 3- 4. (2003: p. 25)

This duplicity is entirely necessary, giving me the courage and freedom to write what I choose by allowing me to confidently assert experience while simultaneously writing about worlds both real and imagined. Michael's constant first-person presence also allows me to provide "the kind of information, never obtained by real people" (Booth 1961: p.3) Through Michael my intention is to guide the reader and as a result, I am in control of what they understand and comprehend about the story. Michael is the observer and what he observes can only be known if he is a witness. Free indirect speech might have been an easier point of view. An omniscient third-person point of view would have allowed me more room to shift into the consciousness of other characters and not rely on Michael so much, but this would

have resulted in spectacle, and it was important to avoid that when writing a story about rape in a small community. I wanted to challenge the brutality of what happens after rape in the lives of families. The first-person voice of a child created more empathy; free indirect speech might have created melodrama and melodrama creates spectacle. Michael's sex and his young age allowed me to explore the issues of the novel on a deeper, less aesthetic level and more importantly judge the unfairness of rape with more impact.

Throughout *Closed Doors*, Michael is confronted by injustice in his own life and more profoundly when his mother goes to court to confront her attacker. I set my book in the 80s during a period of mass unemployment and injustice; Margaret Thatcher was in power, and we called her the "milk snatcher." I remember it as a cold time in history, a poor time. Men were feeling emasculated socially, and unemployment and crime were at a record high. Michael's father reflects that emasculation in many ways. When his wife is raped, he is further emasculated because the one job left to him, to protect his family, feels like something else he has failed at. In truth Brian and Rosemary had problems before the rape, the rape simply illuminates those issues:

> Da says it's good for the flowers except we hardly have any flowers. Da keeps promising to get to it but he never does. "It's not like you don't have the time," says Ma. This makes my tummy go funny when says this because she's said something mean to Da and when everything seemed a bit brilliant again. "I'll get round to it, Rosemary," Da promises. (O'Donnell 2013: p.51)

The novel is also set around about the time the Conservative government wrote the Protect and Survive leaflets showing us how we could survive a Nuclear Attack. I remember I was quite afraid of death because my father liked to scare me by detailing what would happen to my body

in the event of a Nuclear Fall Out. The book takes place around 1982 when the UK was at war over the Falklands. In real life, my father left home to work in construction on behalf of the army there, but was sent home after being drunk and disorderly. I remember the bravery of Simon Weston who was disfigured during the war and the rage on the housing estate of lower income families terrified they might be drafted and killed in a war they did not care about. I did not include any of this in the novel, but I mention Simon Weston in *Closed Doors* because his bravery touched me and I remember it touched my father sent back from the Falklands, not for being courageous, but because he could not stay sober long enough to build an airplane hangar. One of my main characters in *Closed Doors* is Brian Murray, also a drunk, who admires Simon Weston for confronting life head-on. Obviously, Brian is not unknown to me; he is imbued with the whisperings of my father and also myself, in an era I remember vividly, mostly because it is the year I went to live with my parents for the first time and when my anxiety began as an adolescent.

Michael as a narrator as mentioned was a considered narrative choice. He allowed me to hide all traces of myself, preventing sanctimonious storytelling about how unfair the world can be on women. Michael as a narrator enabled a unique perspective, and one that led the reader to invest in a tale narrated by a largely reliable narrator because he has nothing to gain by being unreliable. He is an eavesdropper, a seeker of truth and a trusted spokesperson therefore. He is in fact challenged by truth, and characters deceive him. It is what leads to the moral dilemma of the novel because Michael does not want to lie and so the reader trusts him and becomes a willing ear.

Unlike *The Death Of Bees,* in *Closed Doors*, I fought hard to keep myself out of the work. I felt a male first-person child narrator was necessary to protect my intent, which was to write a book exploring sex crime and its impact on victims and communities, through a trusted lens

and a lens that would give me more of a fictive distance. Booth talks about the importance of protecting the second self in literature: “The art of constructing reliable narrators is largely that of mastering all of oneself in order to protect the persona, the second self that really belongs in the book (Booth, 1961: p. 83). It is another reason I wrote *Closed Doors* in the first-person. I spent day and night with this “second-self” (1961: p. 80), but it was wholly necessary to create the distance I needed to write subjectively. As Booth puts it: “By giving the impression that judgement is withheld, an author can hide from himself that he is sentimentally involved with his character.” This is also why a child narrator works best.

My second self was like family to me in *Closed Doors* and through Michael I could evoke my own feelings. I was as Cixous advocates, “seizing the occasion to speak” (1976*:* p. 1) But *Closed Doors* is not a novel for women only; I wanted to communicate with everyone regardless of their sex.

In 2013 at a local book signing on the Isle of Bute (where the sexual assaults took place) a woman approached me to applaud my writing. I asked her how she liked the second book. I should add I knew this woman. Rothesay is a small community.

“I liked it. Not as much as *The Death Of Bees*, but it was a fun story."
“Fun?” I quizzed. "The stuff with the kids was hilarious. I just felt your first book was more powerful."
“Was it the rapes that upset you?” I asked.
“What rapes?” she quizzed. "The rapes in the book." "I didn't read any rapes."
“Are you sure you read my book? It’s about the assaults that took place in the early eighties”.

The woman paled. She needed a seat. I did not know it, but she had been one of the women who had been attacked on the Island. She had read my book and blanked the core of the narrative through sheer trauma. I do not doubt the second reading possessed of more meaning

for her, though it troubled me the truth had caused her pain.

Obviously what I choose to write about are things that have significance to me personally, but I only invest in those stories if I believe they can be meaningfully shared with others. One of the things I have observed as a teacher of Creative Writing is you have to care about this complicated world if you are going to write stories of consequence. Purpose is everything in prose. I am simply not motivated to write stories that do not impact the lives of others. My third book is *Dandelions are not Weeds*, but before this novel, there was another book called *The Charmer*. I never finished it. It is tucked in a drawer somewhere because I could not find my place in the text. I am nowhere because I could not lend the necessary experience and without experience, I cannot write authentically.

Poppy Shakespeare by Clare Allan published in 2012 by Bloomsbury is another book based on real experience. The author spent ten years of her life in psychiatric health facilities in her youth. With clever writing, retrospect and no sentimentality Allan's narrator is entirely unreliable, despite her experience. The narrator is on prescription medication, possessed with mental health problems and has a rather skewed perception of life. Michael Faber reviewing Allan's novel says, “Books like human beings, can be extremely vulnerable.” (Faber 2006. p.1) and the voice of N captures that vulnerability, by not sounding vulnerable. This lends authenticity because the voice is working hard not to pull at your heartstrings and that is why it does. Allan achieves this chemistry by creating a distinct first-person voice imbued with experience, which permits an intimate insight into the lives of day patients in a psychiatric unit. Her character N helps Poppy understand the system and get “Mad Money” so she can get the legal aid she needs to retain custody of her daughter. Further insight into the isolating circumstances of this unique world is presented when N tells us, "Weren't nobody else in the

world ... not no one at all, alive or dead or both or neither, known as much about dribbling as I did" (Allan. 2012: p 7)

When I asked the author about her novel, a novel which draws on her own experience in psychiatric care, Allan said:

> It was essential to me that Poppy was written in a voice different from my own, as I felt that this liberated me from my 'self', and in a very real sense absented me from the work and enabled the writing of it. (Allan, 2016)

Michael works in the same way. I wanted to absent my 'self" from the work also, to avoid lecturing my reader about sex crime and to enable a point of view that challenges the narrative. What frustrates Michael is that he is forced by his parents' to remain silent and is unable to exact change in the life of his mother or his community. What also adds to his silence is the fact he is a male character. Michael is a coming of age and men are not encouraged to speak out. There is a shame in knowing things and feeling things and talking about these things in a meaningful way as a man. Brian struggles with his own masculinity in the novel. This silence of Brian and Michael creates tension in the novel and the reader waits for Michael to break free of that silence. It happens when Michael finds Louisa Connor raped in The Woody. This marks the end of passivity in Michael when he is confronted by what physically happened to his mother. It is the end of his childhood because he does not return to The Woody to play. Michael is also forced into action and as a result adulthood.

Kerry Hudson's semi-biographical debut *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float And Then Stole Me Ma* (Hudson. 2013) was dependent on her life experience as a child and the novel is an honest and powerful portrayal of poverty and neglect. Living in bedsits and caravan parks most of her childhood, Hudson writes of her own experiences through the evolving first-

person voice of Janie Ryan caring for her mother Iris who is loosely based on Hudson's own mother, a single parent caring for two young children with mental health challenges. Hudson's experience is important in the novel and she makes effective use of the first-person to articulate it. The novel starts with Janie as an observer to her own birth: "Get out you cunting, shitting, little fucker," were the first words I ever heard." (Hudson 2013: p.1) In an interview with Peter Moore, she reveals how Janie's voice evolved. "Janie's voice came fully formed as soon as I started the book - I likened it to the drumming of her little fists on my back when I wasn't typing fast enough." (Hudson 2015:) They say there is a damaged child inside us all and I love the idea of it banging its "little fists" on our creative souls demanding to be heard in some way. I think that is true of any voice that holds trauma, it could be a child or maybe the trauma was experienced by an adult and they too are banging their "little fists."

Readers clearly recognize the imagined worlds I create, largely because those experiences are not entirely imagined. A New York Times' review of 2014 provides evidence of this:

> *Closed Doors* begins in early 1982, the time of Margaret Thatcher's reign and of Britain's undeclared war over some other remote islands. Like Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *Black Swan Green,* by David Mitchell, O'Donnell's novel effectively evokes the carefree joys of adolescence as well as all of its terrors, real and imagined (Ervin 2014: p.1)

In my experience, if a reader does not believe the author they will not invest in their novels and they will not care about their characters, and that is why the narrative personae I create, as revealed in this thesis, are inextricably connected to author experience.

In summing up, I include a review of *Closed Doors* written by Alfred Hickling, which appeared in *The Guardian*. The review gave a nice summary of *Closed Doors* and acknowledged the persona of Michael as believable. I feel this illustrates the importance of writing as far as you

can from a knowing place and a place that more often than not comes with real-life experience.

> O'Donnell has created a resourceful, scabby-kneed character who is both believably childish and knowingly perceptive. Yet the novel never feels as blisteringly original as its predecessor, which made use of a rotating cast of narrators – streetwise Marnie, her slightly autistic younger sister Nelly, – who spoke in the prim register of one who has absorbed too many Enid Blyton adventures – and their neighbour, a lonely gay bachelor, who brought a lucid, adult perspective to the girls' attempts to fend for themselves. *Closed Doors*, by comparison, relies on the first-person testimony of Michael – which, while admirably direct, sometimes seems a little bald on the page: 'My da is sad, my granny is sad. We are all afraid and I pray for my ma to get better." (Hickling 2013: pg. 4)

At the end of the day, though some life experiences are evidenced in *Closed Doors*, I have often wondered why I wrote about events that took place thirty-five years ago. Maybe there was no reason at all, or maybe there is a reason, a reason I cannot explicitly share, and so I create a persona in Rosemary, a mother, who can perhaps share it for me. Or perhaps I was simply compelled to return to the past and write about an event and a place known to me. In *Texts for Nothing* Beckett suggests it is impossible to determine what truly motivates the writer to write: "I don't know why I told this story, I could just as well have told another" (1946: p. 4) Maybe I could have told another, but I did not. I chose this story because it reflects issues that are important to me, issues that have impacted me personally.

Storytelling for me is about a willingness to occupy terrain known to me, terrain experienced by me. In truth who can write anything meaningful if it cannot be shared? If my real aim is to break the silence that has plagued my childhood, I obviously need that silence heard by someone. It iswhat frees us of the past. Van der Kolk notes in his book *The Body Keep Score*

a quote by Robert Pen Warren from his novel *World Enough and Time*: “You live through that little piece of time that is yours, but that piece of time is not only your own life, it is the summing up of all the other lives that are simultaneous with yours…What you are is an expression of History." (Van der Kolk 2015: p.26) I am a writer who must know what I am writing about because without that knowledge I have no tales to tell, no insight to offer and no history to share. And if culture and identity and community are to be meaningfully protected, then we need the sharing of stories that stem from a place of real experience.

CONCLUSION:

Hannah Arendt says, "Storytelling is a coping strategy that involves making words stand in for the world," She says "By constructing, relating and sharing stories, people continue to restore viability to their relationships with others." (Jackson 2013: p. 18). Psychologists and therapists have asserted the same: "People cannot get better without knowing what they know and feeling what they feel." (Van der Kolk 2015: p. 27) In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score* Van der Kolk acknowledges that trauma can paralyse the senses, stop us from gaining any real insights into our lives and prevent us from truly expressing ourselves.

It is difficult to share trauma. Decades can go by in a shroud of silence. I left home at 16, and I did not tell anyone about the abuses I endured at the hand of my father for 22 years. I had children before I was forced to confront what happened in our family home. I experienced anxiety and imagined my children were in some kind of danger. This terror felt real and was hard to talk about, and so I wrote a book about two little girls in what I told myself were imagined dangers. Van der Volk notes it is "enormously difficult to organize one's traumatic experiences into a coherent account, a narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end." (Van der Kolk 2015: p. 27) And this is why I embrace fiction, in a bid to house my experience because in storytelling I found coherency. It is also why I chose child narrators in response to this dilemma.

In her thesis *Extremely Young and Incredibly Wise. The Function of Child Narrators*, Steinmetz notes "the choosing of a child narrator gives the writer more opportunity to confront issues historically ignored." (2011: p. 17) In other words, the voice of a child is easily heard in literature and readers will listen more readily to their stories about domestic abuse, rape, poverty, and mental health. The success of Emma Donoghue's *Room* evidences that. More

than that the reader is more likely to trust and believe a child's voice because as Beckett observes children are whitewashed in fiction. They can say what they please, observe what they see and without the same prejudices adults are burdened by. "The modern child narrator criticizes and judges his own progress, while the reading adult turns into silenced observer" (Steinmetz 2011: p.47) This leads to empathy. It is why I choose a child narrator for *Closed Doors* because the novel is about rape and impossible to escape from. Michael as the lens desensitizes the subject matter and I find readers are more willing to observe if they are relieved of tension in areas. Michael only judges himself and his inaction, and he may be the carrier of a great secret, but he also has everyday concerns that add humour, like doing his Keepie Uppies and winning the local talent contest. He also fights with the local children and falls in love with Dirty Alice. It is the same with *The Death Of Bees.* Marnie and Nelly have buried their parents and are themselves traumatized. Living each day as best they can. It is their survival that drives the narrative, and this survival is often comically communicated in the voice of children.

They say in trauma the left side of the brain shuts down, while the right lights up like a Christmas tree. "They are two halves of the one brain but speak different languages. The right is intuitive, emotional, visual, spatial, and tactual and the left is linguistic, sequential, and analytical." (Van der Kolk 2015: p. 45) The right is the non-verbal of the two and carries the "music of experience" (Van der Kolk 2015: p. 45). The left is the hemisphere that puts the experience in order and gives experience its context. More importantly, the left reminds us we are in the here and now. "Under normal circumstances the left and right brain work hand in hand, but if one side shuts down it can be disabling." (Van der Kolk 2015: p. 45) When something reminds a person suffering trauma of their past, their right brain reacts as if the trauma was happening in the present. But because their left brain is not working as well it should, they not be aware that they are reenacting and reexperiencing the past - they are simply terrified, furious, ashamed or frozen (Van der Kolk 2015: p. 46) This is how I felt when I had

my daughter. I was "frozen" but when I wrote *The Death Of Bees* something inside me seemed to melt away. In creating a narrative around what happened to my sister and me, I was able to own myself again, by confronting the pain, but only in fiction could I do this. As a result, my left brain seemed to wake up and hold hands with my right brain again and because of that, I felt safe again.

Drawing on real events enabled me to find myself and to free myself of yesterday. Arendt says "Trauma implies a radical loss of agency. Of one's ability to live in the present rather than the past." (2013: p. 23) I feel storytelling reinstated that loss of agency and Arendt would agree. "Storytelling mediates recovery of the sense of being empowered, as well as being connected to the world. But storytelling is also a way in which we act in the face of forces that render us silent." (2013: p. 23)

I conclude with an interest in the role storytelling has on the community. It is acknowledged by many the danger inherent in dismissing authorial experience in text, particularly where identity is already repressed, undervalued and undermined, ethnic minorities for example, LGBT communities or any community where human experiences are marginalized, ignored and politically silenced. In the UK only 11% of people involved in the publishing industry are not Oxford graduates, as noted by author Kerry Hudson in an article written on behalf of The Writers' Centre Norwich for *The Bookseller:*

> Imagine four writers. They are talented, they have written brilliant, sales-worthy books. They are respectively BAME, LGBT, working- class, disabled. They go in search of publication. Feedback comes in: "The writing is good but it didn't speak to me. I don't know how I'd sell this." Of course, to love a book it must resonate, represent a society we recognise, have relatable characters. However, the agents and editors who will decide if our writers will be published may not "connect" with these stories…This is

not a system which fosters diversity" (Hudson 2015: p 1).

Hudson makes an important point and I feel it has a worrying effect on the stories we actually get to hear as readers and the stories we get to write. If diversity is not fostered what happens to our shared histories? The reality of trauma is that the people who are put through it are often vulnerable in some way because of their age, their gender, their ethnicity, their sexual preferences, their economic situation, their politics or their class. If it is true the middle classes dominate the publishing world and are refusing to acknowledge these underrepresented stories, then how can we meaningfully record history and share our experience as a community and more importantly how can we heal?

In conclusion, stories as a medium have allowed me and other writers, as evidenced in this thesis, to tell stories shaped by our own unique experiences of life, often leading to literature that reflects those experiences. How can we raise awareness of key social issues without such stories? Though I can only speak of my own motivation when including aspects of my life, I believe storytelling has saved me and has allowed me to make sense of myself and the life I have lived.

Appendices.

A collection of press comments, blogs, and reviews which provide some indication of the variety of reader responses to the two books.

Appendix i

Praise for *The Death Of Bees*:

"In this first novel she pulls off the unusual pairing of grisly and touching." (*New York Times*)

"O'Donnell walks a fine line, describing appalling events without ever allowing the novel to lose its warm heart....*The Death Of Bees* is that rare thing: a family-values black comedy." (*Christian Science Monitor*)

"Wild, witty and as funny as it is unsettling. *The Death Of Bees* is really about the strength of sisters, the sparkle of imagination and how even the most motley of half-lives can somehow coalesce into a shining whole." (*Houston Chronicle*)

"O'Donnell's finely drawn characters display the full palette of human flaws and potential. Told in the alternating voices of Marnie, Nelly, and Lennie, this beautifully written page-turner will have readers fretting about what will become of the girls." (*Booklist (*starred review))

"[A] chiller told in three voices which will intrigue readers to the last pages…O'Donnell has done a masterful job of sketching her characters…The end is largely unexpected and highly dramatic, but at the same time is the perfect ending to this chilling tale…[a] brilliant book." (*Examiner* (Northern California))

"With characters and voices the remind me of other strong debut novels (like *Fates Will Find Their Way* and *Vaclav* and *Lena*), this book will appeal to readers who like a strong voice, dark humor, and compelling storylines told in a literary yet accessible way." (*Publishers Weekly*)

“Lisa O’Donnell, an award-winning screenwriter, grabs the reader from the get-go...” (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*)

“The author brilliantly paints the characters’ best traits through the eyes of the other characters, and their worst traits through their own voices.” (*RT Book Reviews*)

“O’Donnell’s wildly original debut examines the intricacies of betrayal and loyalty within one family and their effects on two vulnerable young girls…With a gritty but redemptive take on family and the price of secrets, O’Donnell’s debut will be well-received by fans of mainstream literature and Scottish noir mysteries alike.” (*Shelf Awareness*)

“The sisters and Lennie narrate alternating chapters, moving the story along at a fast clip....The difference between the sisters in terms of personality and maturity puts them at odds despite their shared fear of discovery. But their resilience suggests hope for their blighted lives.” (*Publishers Weekly* (boxed review))

“In more ways than the first line, *The Death Of Bees* reminds me of Donoghue’s *Room*. Maybe it’s because both authors originated from the United Kingdom. Maybe it’s because both stories carry a darkness brightened only by the innocence of the main characters. (*Spencer Daily Reporter*)

“The quirky characters and thrilling plotlines will leave readers anxious to find out what will become of the girls. This poignant, compelling, and hopeful tale teaches readers that a desperate situation can always be alleviated by reaching out to others.” (*The Hub*)

“This is a sweet, funny book filled with two sister’s unrelenting love for each other and their determination to stay together at all costs…it is a good read and if you are interested in being taken on a crazy ride, this is the book for you.” (*Bibliophage*)

“As a gothic novel and a psychological look at the effects of trauma, it had verve and nerve…O’Donnell knows how to keep a reader engaged, and her sympathy -- and hope -- for her characters tempers what could have been a sordid tale.” (*Columbus Dispatch*)

“Quirky characters with distinct voices enliven this sometimes grim and often funny coming-of-age story in the vein of Karen Russell’s best seller *Swamplandia*! O’Donnell’s debut is sure to be a winner.” (*Library Journal*)

“An unusual coming-of-age novel that features two sisters who survive years of abuse and neglect....The author’s experience as a screenwriter is most definitely apparent, as the reader always hears the voices and can visualize the dramatic, sometimes appallingly grim scenes. Recommended.” *(Kirkus Reviews*)

“*The Death Of Bees* is completely addictive. A beautiful and darkly funny story of two sisters building a fantasy within a nightmare.” (Alison Espach, author of *The Adults*)

“*The Death Of Bees* is compelling stuff, engaging the emotions from the first page and quickly becoming almost impossible to put down.” (*Herald (Scotland)*)

“As the action reaches a feverish climax…dark comedy is replaced by nerve-shredding tension…the reader is thoroughly caught up in the emotional trials and tribulations of two unlikely heroines….Warm without being cozy, explicit without being shocking, and emotive without being schmaltzy…a powerful coming-of-age tale…” (*Scotsman*)

“This vibrantly-imagined novel, by turns hilarious and appalling, is hard to resist.” (*Daily Mail* (London))

“Mixing *The Ladykillers* with Irvine Welsh’s *The Acid House*… O’Donnell adeptly balances caustic humour and compassion.” (*Guardian*)

“*The Death Of Bees* steadily draws you into its characters’ emotional lives.” *(Financial Times*)

“The most original and incredible piece of writing I’ve come across in years.” (Helen Fitzgerald, author of *Dead Lovely*)

“Warm without being cozy, explicit without being shocking, and emotive without being schmaltzy . . . a powerful coming-of-age tale.” (*Scotsman*)

Appendix ii.

Praise for *Closed Doors*:

Starred Review Booklist Feisty, young Michael Murray likes to eavesdrop through doors. When his mother arrives home with bruises on her face, he is confused and frightened by what he hears. Soon after, Michael is shunned by certain schoolmates, and his father becomes a pariah in their small community. But why? Over the course of several months, Michael manages to piece together the events of that fateful night and learns the secret that is tearing his family apart. Set in the early 1980s on a picturesque island off the coast of Scotland, the novel is told in first-person from Michael's perspective. O'Donnell wonderfully captures the voice of a precocious (and quite likable) 11-year-old as he grapples with issues and emotions he may not fully understand. The novel asks (and possibly answers) two important questions—to what extent should children be protected from the truth, and does silence do more harm than good? While it deals with disturbing subject matter, this is an engaging page-turner that effectively explores the trials and tribulations of childhood with warmth and humor. --Kerri Price *--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.*

"Writing in a child's voice is risky, but Lisa O'Donnell pulls it off in her second novel. . . . Ms. O'Donnell avoids triteness in this story of lost innocence, favoring candor and dark humor in the aftermath of violence." (*New York Times*)

"The dissonance between what a child narrator knows and what adult readers can make out is fully exploited here to great effect, and is reminiscent of Emma Donoghue's *Room* . [A] compulsive read, grounded in a realism which, depicted through a child's eyes - with that hint

of a child's surreal perception - gathers together violence, humour and love in a most believable way." (*Scotland on Sunday*, *Book of the Week*)

"O'Donnell makes you feel the frustration of an intelligent child who knows he's being kept in the dark . There's loss of innocence here, but the overwhelming tone is warm and sparky; O'Donnell shows how a shattered family can remake itself, and Michael's narrative voice is delightful - observant, thoughtful, comical and thoroughly believable." (Kate Saunders *The Times*)

"A sweet and uplifting read that celebrates the messy, complicated business of family. Michael is a lively and endearing narrator." (*Daily Mail*)

"[A] coming-of-age novel . *Closed Doors* provides an engaging child's eye view of a working-class community that is nuanced and insightful." (*The Herald*)

"Impressive . A hugely accomplished piece of storytelling." (Doug Johnstone *Big Issue*)

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