

University of South Australia

Kathleen Mary Fallon

Spirit of France – a biography

Kaye Nine

Biographical note:

Kathleen Mary Fallon holds a Masters from Murdoch University and is working on a PhD through the Hawke Research Institute, focusing on the Australian South Sea Islander community. She was co-ordinator and lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne for eight years and was a Senior Editor at Allen and Unwin. Amongst her major works is a three-part project – a novel, *Paydirt* (UWAPress), a play, *Buyback*, and a feature film, *Call me Mum* (short-listed for the NSW Premier's Prize and an AWGI, nominated for three AFI Awards, winning for Best Female Support Actress). Her novel, *Working hot*, won a Victoria Premier's Prize and her opera, *Matricide – the musical*, with the composer Elena Kats-Chernin, was produced by Chamber Made Opera.

In the empty bar of the Maroubra Hotel, scraping a place for the chairs in the cigarette butts and ash, looking out through the drizzle at the Warning High Pollution Levels Swimming Prohibited beach Tres Bien saw Kaye Nine was sizing her up. Turning her drink on the sopping cardboard coaster, fitting it in and out of sticky concentric circles on the dirty plastic tabletop, Kaye Nine told her something about herself. Something she had judged Tres Bien was ready to hear. She told her about a dog.

She said, 'I tell you this now because I think you will not feel sorry for me. I believe you will take it in the spirit in which it is intended. You will grieve with me, for the dog, and a little bit for the child I was. You won't think of me now as a Poorkid asking for donations and for more understanding in some gauche current affair appealathon program. My sister Marie-Marie and I were on TV one Christmas with a lot of other Poorkids in an appealathon. Viewers were asked to send in Christmas presents for us and in return they each received a lost dog from the Pound. I remember very well that some viewer sent in a xylophone for me. I used to tell my stories all the time. At first I was forced to, to social workers, priests, directors of institutions, counsellors, doctors, psychologists, teachers. I knew they were just wanting to compare what I told them to what they had in front of them on my file. Later I told my stories to friends, lovers, acquaintances, neighbours, people on trains, whoever I could buttonhole for a few hours. I knew I would get sympathy, attention, Poorkid love. People would be kind to me, try to love me and give me what I had missed out on as a Poorkid. Then they'd find a new hobby, a new charitycause, get tired of my stubborn refusals, my failuret thrive under their lovingcare. I do not want that type of attention anymore. I do not want to sing that victim's lament. You understand.' Then she told me about her dog, Mick.

'Make a party story out of this then. You Australians can make a party story out of anything.'

'Mick. A farmer found him and his brother as puppies running wild and hungry in the forest so he took them home. The farmer wanted to keep Mick's brother because Mick was pretty little and pathetic, so he said, "Take that one". Mick came home with me to the village, running after my bike, tied with a piece of rope, and we loved each other right away but he kept running back to the farmer and his brother and I'd ride out and fetch him back with a leash tied to the back of the bike. After the third time, when I had to go back to get him I was crying and crying and I said, "Don't you like me Mick. If you run back again I won't come to get you. If you don't want to live with me I won't force you." He followed me home that time without a leash and he never went back to the farm or the farmer or his brother again. His brother died a little while later when he ran straight into a wall. They do that sometimes, dogs. I don't know why. From then on we were together all the time. I'd take my bike and my dog and go into the forest and watch him for hours and hours. He was so happy. And it told me something about happiness – that happiness, it does exist. I was so hard and sad then and that dog gave me a lot, a lot. '

'That year, as usual, my sister, Marie-Marie, and I were sent away for the summer to a holiday camp for Poorkids and at the end of the camp we were not sent home as we

expected. No one told us why or where we were going. We were sent off to another institution where our father, who we hadn't seen for many years, came to pick us up. All he said was, "You're coming to live with me now".'

'That was after my mother had killed herself and I was so relieved and I was living with my father. After a while, I told him about Mick and we went back to the village to look for him. I asked everyone. I went to the Arab family I'd been friendly with and they said he'd come back for months and months looking for me but hadn't been seen for quite a while now. Before my mother died she was mad, mad and my brother came home one week-end and heard a noise coming from a cupboard. My mother had locked Mick in and forgotten him when she was so out of it. Who knows how long he must have been in there? My brother said he was almost dead and crazy, really crazy. He said he just flew out of the cupboard and out of the house. '

'The ranger hated him. He told me he would shoot him one day and that is probably what happened. My dog was free, roaming in the forest and the ranger hated him.'

'In the Chateau, one of the institutions where my sister Marie-Marie and I were sent, I was mad to get out, grow up, light upon some obsession that could really save me. Something to nail, fixed, to the stark wall of my mind. When I saw Jacques Cousteau in the ocean on television, shush-shush-shushing the other Poorkids running wild in the TV room, "What's that?" I asked the nurse looking after us that day.'

"That's the ocean."

"How do I get there?"

"Well, you become a fisherman or a fisherman's wife, a tour guide, a taxi driver ..." '

Kaye Nine teaches Tres Bien the meaning of the word 'pathos'

Lesson one – a Leunig cartoon image

Her first year at Lille University, Kaye Nine lived in a high rise amidst many others on campus. One of these new universities built, after the riots of '68, on the outskirts of regional cities – self-contained, so that the students didn't have to have anything to do with the life of the cities or villages.

'Sometimes you'd have to queue for an hour at the canteen to get your horrible cafeteria food and then have ten minutes to bolt it down. At the weekend or on holidays everyone would leave the campus because it closed down and there was nothing to do there. But I didn't have anywhere to go or any money to go with so I stayed. Often my light was the only one on in my tower and often the only one on the whole campus and I'd sit at my little window, gazing for hours through the dark, abandoned towers, watching the traffic lights far away on the Lille/Paris freeway.'

Pathos! She taught Tres Bien the meaning of the word 'pathos'. That is, she taught her that it existed on the verge of being derived from the same root as pathetic but what stopped it toppling was the fact that it was a word with pride and spirit attached.

Pathos – lesson two

'When I was working as an observer on the Russian fishing vessels, one of the sailors asked me if next time I went ashore I would try to sell a little plastic souvenir ashtray with a Mary transfer on it. They weren't allowed to go ashore in case they jumped ship. He explained in his Russian, his broken English and French that they hadn't been paid for months and he wanted to buy a stamp to send a letter home to his wife and kids.'

Pathos has a political dimension. It implicates you; it allows you to act, it makes you empathise.

Pathos – lesson three

I've left toys behind / I always keep my suitcase packet

After my sister (well half-sister) Marie-Marie had turned eighteen and been released, she found the institution I was in and came to visit me. She brought me a beautiful doll. It was porcelain or china, something like that. It was so beautiful. One of the guards locked it in a cupboard for safekeeping. When he came on duty he'd unlock the cupboard and give me the doll to play with. But one night a social worker arrived unexpectedly and told me to pack my suitcase because I was being sent to another institution. But the guard who had the key had gone home and I had to leave my doll behind. I cried and cried and they said they'd send it but they never did of course. I still dream about that doll, locked in that cupboard, I still dream that she's waiting for me there still. Still. Still. I know it's ridiculous but sometimes I want to go back to that dark old place, that grim chateau on the edge of that pine forest, I want to go back and look in that cupboard. Of course I know that she won't be there, of course I know that but still. Still. Still.

Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky

'My mother's vast dreamoflife had reduced to Marie-Marie becoming a concert pianist. We had no furniture, no food, no clothes, all we had in the two room flat where we all lived was wooden boxes, a pile of blankets and a baby grand that my mother Lidia forced Marie-Marie to practice on day and night. We moved many times because we couldn't pay the rent or to avoid the debt collectors. We had nothing but the piano which would have to be lowered over balconies, dismantled to get through doors. And my mother screaming orders and instructions at the removalists. When Marie-Marie went away and my mother's dreams rotted and suppured in sinks and buckets and under our feet, us kids used the piano lid as a slippery slide, as a table. We had no beds so we slept cosily under the lid on the wires. Turning and tuning the strings all night, parodyplaying Mozartchopintchaishostakovsky as we turned in our sleep. My mother was, by this stage beyond caring or trying – screaming for the rotten chicken in the shower recess, for her enema, her medication, her injection, her abortion, her young lover, her children to help her, any one of her husbands to help

her, Saint Bernadette of Lourdes to intercede for her, Mother Mary to succour her, just screaming.' Kaye Nine

When Kaye Nine shut the door on her madmother, Lidia, snoring in her drugged sleep, Marie-Marie playing Mozart Chopin Tchaikovsky at the baby grand, the suppurating chicken in the shower recess, the murky green slime of the plastic Marybottles of holywater from Lourdes, 'Now I will be happy all day,' she'd say as she closed the door, reciting this magic ritual part of her childhood *modus operandi* of survival. 'Mary weeps when little girls whistle – sss s s s ss ss sss s s s ss s' she'd sing.

Survival (or an aestheticisation of poverty?)

'Make a story out of this then. You writers can make a story out of anything.'

Kaye Nine running all over the cities of the France she lived in. Chasing buses with the right names and numbers on the front, trying to follow them home. Checking in the slots of all the telephones, the food, drink and cigarette dispensers in the Metro, for change.

In those last days Kaye Nine came home one night to find Lidia gone. Days later she returned weighed down by heavy shopping bags, some had burst, their contents long lost, others bulged over. It was the very last time Lidia had that manic saved joy in her eye. She'd been to Lourdes and blown her whole month's pension cheque on blueheaded Marybottles of holywater, blessed candles, holy knickknacks, the praying of Special Masses, Pope ashtrays, rosaries or holycharm bracelets for each of the kids, saintly tracts, illustrated prayer bookmarks and a tiny plastic statue of Mary in a halo of minuscule flashing red bulbs, so many angry swollen gangrenous teats. With these she set up an altar on the lid of the piano, forcing capfuls of holywater through the clenched teeth of her children each day until the water went putrid, until Kaye Nine eventually caught her refilling from the kitchen tap, crossing herself and mumbling some sort of farceprayer as she did so.

Tres Bien reminisces

Cleaning the laundry in the new house, thinking of that Poorkid, Kaye Nine, fixing the washing machine. Thinking of her respect for and love of the material, useful world. How happy she was when we got the refrigerator, the vacuum cleaner; restored something broken to utility. Her mother, Lidia, enduring the coat-hanger abortions, performed by her husband, on the kitchen table. (France is a Catholic country after all.) Kaye Nine should have been one of them but she hung on with both hands to her mother's rib cage crying a defiant 'no' into those uterine waters. Lidia making Kaye Nine give her enemas, injections in the buttock. Kaye Nine forcing herself to practice on a pillow. Kaye Nine slivering and cutting the callus under Lidia's foot, the corns on her toes, till she hit raw flesh. 'She was very brave,' she said. 'She didn't make a sound.' Kaye Nine down on her hands and knees at eight years of age scrubbing the floor, washing the clothes, learning to wash herself as she'd seen someone do on TV. 'So that's how they get clean,' thought Miss Smelly, as the kids at school called her.

Over the basin she sponged her face, her arms, her stomach, her legs ... her bottom. 'My bottom? No, leave that till later, till I'm sure about it. That's enough for now.' And Lidia watching, screaming from her serapax sick-bed, 'Who do you think you are Miss High-and-Mighty?'

Making it last

'Every Sunday morning they'd walk us in a line from the Chateau to the church three kilometres away. If we had some money we were allowed to buy lollies from the shop next door to the church after the service. I'd always buy a chocolate bear and I learnt how to make it last all the way so that I'd be eating the left ear by the time we went back through the gates of the Chateau. I could only make it last like that during winter though.' Kaye Nine

Song of Lidia's daughter Kaye Nine

A song from the high lake of lamentation

Most women can't believe that there's not this weak, squashy, longing, whining, whingeing space 'inside' you that you so pitifully, arrogantly, defensively think of as 'yourself,' your 'identity'. They believe that being 'nice,' 'kind,' 'supportive' means revealing this sickening neediness to eachother. (As a dying woman once showed me what had drained into her colostomy bag during the night. As a dying woman once showed me the canceranker of her breast after breakfast.) They can't seem to conceive that another woman could be different than that. Not contain, veil, mollycoddle this. That someone, say myself for instance, might be able to see right through it to the underdog savagery snarling in the heart of every victim.

Lidia

'Au succour! Au succour!' she cries into the *mal aires* decayrotten cavity of the mouth of her night. Her children, still hearing this wail in the winds of the world, turn in their sleep. Turning and tuning the wires of the baby grand. 'Children?' she'd wail 'Dischords!' Her dreams of musical excellence long blasted in the abrasive screech of her voice.

Lidia, that old dero-licked woman, said to me, 'Ever been so low and lonely you rang Life Line just to hear someone say your name, so skin hungry for affection you tried to get a dog to fuck you, a cat to lick you'.

After Lidia died, Kaye Nine found an ancient clock, all face, no hands, ticking away under her bed. She'd felt silly about it but, every night, before she went to sleep, she'd take the clock out and wind it 'so that when I wake up during the night I'll know I'm in my bed not in my grave'. The clock had been given to her by her mother over half a century before.

Folie a deux (not to mention deja vu) of two too exigent souls
the other conjured into existence through the mediation of speech

well tended

Tres Bien eavesdrops Kaye Nine's 'Lament of the neutered'

I have scrubbed out my body
no lover can read it
can't read a blessed thing in it
there is no shadow
there are no shadowy untended places
not the shadow of a stain
there are black out lines
she says she's sick of colouring them in
why can't she be more of a minimalist

Tres Bien says there is a feral child she catches
in the corner of the eye of her blind spot
she wants me to deliver that child over
she says we are twotoo sad children – orphaned children
that that child makes her cry and there's no sex in that
she says she wants us to be twotoo wild feral children
find at last the other half of the pain, the pleasure
at least find a pack to run with
or a flock to fly with
when she says that I only remember the kid with the fork stuck in its cheek in the
institution, in the Chateau
or I remember my mother, Lidia
food rotting all over the house
the rancid chicken in the shower recess for instance
the smell of clothes suppurating in buckets in the kitchen

I remember trying to learn to wash myself (but leaving the bottom till another time)
and my mother watching me from her bed and screaming 'Who do you think you are,
Miss Princess, washing yourself hahaha'.

But most of all I think about Jacques Cousteau flying his chopper into a wilderness,
over a desert, over a jungle. I think of the four faces of the terrified feral women who
ran in mad circles around each other in their own panicdust under the whirring silver
blades. 'The last survivors of an extinct tribe,' he called them, hailing them through his
megaphone. I'm afraid her voice above me in bed chops into the air, is unnaturally
loud, is somehow augmented and magnified by her trumpeting heart, her trumpeting
sex. Her cargocult hands are held, full up, with promises and presents, she says.

Two too tooserious children

Two too toosad children

I learnt all I know from dirty dogs
in the backstreets of all the dirtycities of my childhood country France
in the National Estate forests and the Private Trespassers Prosecuted forests amongst
the cultivated fields where I took them to play
learnt fleshy physicality, boom-or-bust funjoy, catch-as-catch-can friendship, bosom-
buddy companionship, when-thieves-fall-out manners, DO-NOT-CROSS-THE-
TRACKS-WHEN-THE-BOOM-AND-BELL-ARE-IN-OPERATION
survivalinstincts, sheep-dog mastery, wet-nose-in-crack eroticism, do-doggy sex
learnt the sniff and the smell
learnt the growl and the howl well well into the night – full moon or no moon
learnt dog-concentration through the simple pleasure of holding the bone
learnt to simply exist in mysenses, myviscera, myskin
learnt loyalty and nobility and toughness
learnt stealth and clevercunning
learnt to run with the pack with the scent in my nostrils
learnt the ways and the time it takes to tame the abused cur
(she wants me running back and forth across the landscape of her body, sniff out her
sex, run it to ground, dig up that worry-wish bone)

... but though those two are buried at opposite ends of the earth, one dog will
find them both. Djuna Barnes