

Central Queensland University

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Ebb and flow

Biographical note:

Leanne Dodd is a doctoral candidate at Central Queensland University, researching the transformative potential of creative writing. She has qualifications in arts, education, training, mental health, communications and business. Under the pen name of Lea Scott, she has published three crime novels with developing themes of trauma, and co-authored three short story anthologies. Leanne serves as Chair of the Queensland Writers Centre Management Committee and is an appointed mentor for emerging crime writers. She has appeared on festival panels and facilitated writing workshops and seminars throughout Queensland. Her research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

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Flow

There is a foul stench on this stretch of road as if something has been rotting in the culvert below. I screw up my nose. It drags me back into an unexpected memory of my father, like a merciless ocean rip, and I am powerless to resist its current.

He is standing on the shoulder of the road, rifle cocked. Moments before, a kangaroo doe had leapt into the path of our ute. My father aims the rifle at her head and the animal's body jolts as the bullet finds its mark. 'Nothing we could do for her,' he says. We both spot the small nose poking out of her pouch at the same time, followed by a frightened set of eyes that dart between us. He points the rifle at the small joey's head.

I let out a long screech and rush him, trying to pry the rifle from his arms. 'No, Daddy. Why can't we take him home? He's only a baby.'

He raises his hand and my body instinctively shrinks away. 'It's just a bloody kangaroo. Get back in the car. Now!'

I slink back to the car and wail as I hear the shot ring out. My father slams the door as he gets back in the car, terrifying me into silence.

I bolt upright in the seat, knuckles white as I grip the steering wheel and remind myself he is dead. I peer ahead for any sign of speed cameras then press my foot a little harder on the accelerator as I head into the setting rural sun. I can feel the pressure of a migraine building at the nape of my neck and try to massage it away with my free hand. It's Friday and the peak-hour traffic before the turnoff was hell. I could see the desperation on the faces of the commuters around me, eager to be home. I envy them.

I blame Ebony. A few years back, I would still be sitting in the bar beginning to feel the buzz from my third or fourth glass of wine. It was Ebb who made me want to hold on to that moment for one last drink after my new exhibition opening this afternoon. I was stupid to let her sway me, because then I couldn't drive for another hour. I travel down to the city once a fortnight now. It's important that I remain part of the art scene to promote and sell my paintings. The *real* art scene. The locals where I now live try to entice me with their small-town community gallery events. I've exhibited my work all over Sydney and Melbourne – and once in New York! As I take the final turn and start up the steep range, I pass the lone goat tied to a tree in someone's front yard. Today he is standing on top of the old pile of bricks, perhaps instinctually remembering his ancestors were mountain climbers. This is as high as he will ever climb in this place. *Barainee*. Ironically, it's the local Aboriginal word for 'on top' – on top of the mountain, on top of the clouds. On top of the scrap heap? I won't let this poor goat's fate become mine.

Barainee. A hub for creatives, my colleagues told me with a sly wink. It's a whole alternate universe suspended in a space somewhere between the civilised coast and the rugged outback. Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing in this little hinterland town. Then I remember Justin – and how he saved me.

As if he's read my mind, the radio shuts off and the phone's ringtone echoes through the car. 'Hey Flow, just wondering how far away you are. I've got dinner ready and Charlie is chomping at the bit.'

‘Just feed her then. You know how ratty she gets if she hasn’t eaten.’

‘She wants to wait for you.’

Charlie always gets her way with him because Justin hasn’t been around kids for that long. We’ve only been married a year. I grip the steering wheel harder. ‘Okay, I’m about fifteen minutes away. The traffic was hell.’ I can hardly tell him it was Ebony’s fault. He doesn’t know about her.

The bright spotlights assault my eyes as I navigate the car into the garage twenty minutes later. I cover one eye, desperate to get inside and take some strong painkillers before the sledge-hammer effect begins. As I near the house, I can hear Charlie’s high-pitched squeal. I cringe.

I am just swallowing the last tablet as Charlie stomps into the kitchen, dragging Justin by the hand. He cocks his head. ‘Another migraine?’

He doesn’t understand migraines either. Nobody does unless they’ve had one.

The table is set for three, plates, forks, knives and a spoon for Charlie. A metallic aura extends outward from them. I am aware of Charlie’s tittering voice but the medication has set off a tornado in my head so her words are incomprehensible. She becomes more insistent.

‘Flow,’ Justin prompts. ‘Can you answer Charlie?’

I turn my head and my daughter’s long blonde hair swims into my vision. ‘Sorry Sweetie, what did you say?’

She pouts. ‘I forgot.’ She begins to kick her feet against the table leg as she lifts her fork to her mouth.

My head pounds in unison. ‘Please stop kicking the table, Charlie.’

She kicks harder and glares at me over her fork as she continues to shovel food into her mouth.

‘Charlie, I said *stop!*’

Charlie loads her fork up with food then slams it down onto the table. I duck as mashed potato and gravy fly through the air towards me.

I push back my chair and grab her by the arm. ‘That’s not appropriate behaviour, young lady. If you’re going to throw your food around then you can go to your room without finishing your dinner.’ I pick her up and carry her to her room. I feel bile rising in my throat. I continue down the hall, ignoring the muffled howls coming from her room, then fall onto the bed in a sea of pain and twirling blue lights.

I wake, gasping for air. The night is still but my heart pounds. I pad down to the kitchen to take more painkillers for my throbbing head.

I rouse in the small hours of the morning as kookaburras sound the first alarm of the day. I try to claw my way out of my drug-induced fog when I am struck by the memory

of my father's voice. For a split second, the world around me stops. Then Justin lets out a raucous snort that jolts me back to the present. I snuggle into his back, trying to find a more pleasant memory to lull me back to sleep. My earliest memories are faded and blurred around the edges like the Polaroid pictures I have of myself as a child. My mother reads to me, pointing first to the words then to the pictures so I make the connections. She brushes my hair in long, loving strokes and tucks me into bed with my worn teddy bear and a warm kiss to the forehead. My father is not present in these memories but I don't know if that's because he was not around much then – my mother says he spent a lot of time at the pub – or whether some part of my small brain blocked him out to preserve only the good memories. My mother won't talk to me about him. She still blames me for his death.

*

I wake to sun-warmed air and glance over at the clock. It is late. *Damn!* I hope the new puppy hasn't peed all over the laundry. My migraine has receded but the daylight brings no respite from the terrible nightmares the painkillers evoked. A vague series of watery images and sensations drift back into the recesses of my unconscious. My mother says I nearly drowned as a child but my only memory of it is my father's merciless teasing.

'I won't go... flowww.' He draws out the last word, followed by one of his huge belly laughs.

My mother says he nicknamed me 'Flow' after that – for how I almost flowed out to sea. I squeeze my eyes shut but the memories still haunt me.

My father grabs me by one arm and lifts me toward him. 'Get out of my sight!' I feel his spittle spray across my face before he drops me. My mother ushers me toward my room. Moments later the yelling starts. It surges down the hall and floods through the gaps around my flimsy bedroom door. Something smashes against the wall and I curl my legs up under my chin. I open my new book and Enid Blyton's magic wishing chair transports me to a faraway land. A small voice whispers in my head.

He can't hurt you here.

Perhaps this is my earliest memory of her. That other voice inside who is me – and isn't. I am not intact like other people. She is not afraid of anything – not even the water, which terrifies me. She was more than an imaginary friend. She was my darker side so I called her Ebony. To cope with life, sometimes you can only face a tiny bit of it. Somewhere along the way, she became the custodian of all that I wanted to forget.

Ebb

It is dark. The kind of shadowy darkness where something lurking in the bushes might eat you up if you aren't careful. You try to keep close behind Daddy's silhouette, focussing on your small shadow formed by the street lamp but his hulking shadow eats it up too. It is deathly quiet except for the slapping sound of the waves against the sides of the concrete

boat ramp. You try to take his hand but he pushes you away roughly. You run ahead down the ramp as he thrusts the dinghy through the mud.

'Watch out,' he shouts. 'You'll end up going in the water!'

You look back defiantly, your feet skidding to a stop in the mud. 'I won't go...'

Stopping is a big mistake. Your feet leave you and you fling your arms into the air to regain your balance. Your feet are sliding faster now, down into the muddied water that waits to suck you under. You gasp and choke on the brackish water as you try to pull your foot free from the thick mud's grip.

Through your splutters comes a booming noise. Daddy's voice, and the anger in it now makes you shudder. You squeeze your hands over your ears and brace yourself for the blow but it doesn't come as the current suddenly drags you from the mud and carries you away from his voice. Your relief is short-lived. The cold water churns you into its murky depths and you can't work out which way is up. You – can't – breathe. You close your eyes and feel yourself sinking.

Your nose burns and you cough up water as rough hands drop you on the gravel in front of your mother's feet. 'You don't deserve to come out with me, you ignorant little brat!' He raises his hand and you burrow into your mother's skirt.

Flow

I pad down the hall, tripping over one of my slippers lying outside Charlie's door and kick it to one side. I don't remember losing it during the night. I tiptoe up to her bed, my heart swelling. I enjoy these delicious moments when I can breathe her in before she wakes and becomes a cannonball of frenetic energy. My eyes narrow. She is not in her bed. Normally I have to wake her then spend the next ten minutes cajoling her out of it. A lump forms in my chest as I recall how I lost my temper with her last night. It was wrong of me to have projected my anger onto her. It's not her fault I miss my old life.

When I was little and my father yelled at me, I would hide under my bed. I stoop to look underneath but she's not hiding there. I lift the bedcovers but there is only a slight indentation where she has slept. I run the top of my palm against the pale pink sheet. Cold. My eyes glance across the bed and through the small window. The glint of the morning sun on the lagoon can still unhinge me even though we've lived in this house for three months. Justin doesn't know about my aquaphobia – nobody does. The sight is like liquid nitrogen, snap freezing my veins so I stiffen from head to toe. I take deep ragged breaths as I see Charlie in my mind's eye by the water.

I try to slow my breathing. I put her to bed early. She's probably just got up to play with the puppy.

'Charlie?' My voice echoes down the empty hall. 'Charlie, where are you, Sweetheart?' Edging down the hall, I avoid looking out the window as I open the door to the laundry. The black and white puppy looks up at me with forlorn eyes and whimpers. Charlie is not with him. I let him out the back door.

‘Charlie,’ I call as I make my way back into the hall. ‘It’s time to get ready for kinda-dance.’ It’s our Saturday morning mother and daughter ritual now she’s at prep during the week. She is still adjusting to being away from me for full days but if I am honest, I have been enjoying the extra time to paint. There is no sign of her in the bathroom or the living room. Annoyance creeps into my voice. ‘Charlie, I hope you’re not on that computer!’ I push the study door open quickly, hoping to catch her in the act but the room is empty.

‘Charlie?’ It is such a big house with so many places for a small inquisitive girl to explore – *or to hide*. It strikes me that she might not want to go to kinda-dance, or she doesn’t want to go with *me*.

Movement catches my eye from the kitchen. I step into the sunny room then my gaze locks on the door into the back garden.

Flap. Flap.

My gaze shifts to the lagoon. ‘No-oo!’ The room turns cold and the word hangs on my tongue as if time has frozen, despite the ticking of the clock booming louder in my ears.

The door flaps again. I regain my senses. Start to run. Sweep the back garden in circles; call out her name; crawl into her usual play spots; gaze up into the trees for any sign of contrasting colour. She is nowhere. I turn back toward the water and clasp clammy hands over my head.

‘*Char-leeeee!*’ The blood-curdling screech seems to be far off then I realise it is coming from me. It spills from my lips then gushes toward the lagoon but I am rooted to the spot like the giant ghost gum that stands sentinel over me.

Justin manifests behind me. ‘Flow? What is it? What’s wrong?’

‘It’s –’ I can’t find words.

He touches my shoulder and it jolts me from my stupor. ‘I ... I can’t find Charlie,’ I stammer, dropping to the ground.

‘She must be here somewhere.’ He follows my line of sight toward the lagoon. ‘She knows not to go near the water.’

My body begins to tremble.

‘Come on,’ Justin coaxes me. ‘Come back to the house and I’ll go look for her.’

I shake my head in a fierce arc as my fear transforms into anger.

He did this. He brought you here.

I don’t feel in control of my body. Justin pulls me up and guides me to the kitchen table. Then he is gone. I hear him systematically moving from room to room, calling Charlie’s name. My eyes have not left the water. I crack my knuckles down one hand, my mind again filling with terrifying visions.

‘She’s not in the house,’ Justin says when he returns. Is his nonchalant tone for my sake? Why isn’t he concerned?

Because Charlie isn’t his daughter.

'I'm going to have a better look outside'. He stops when he hears the crack of my knuckle as I begin on my other hand. 'Don't do that to yourself. You know it gives me the creeps.'

'It doesn't hurt,' I respond, avoiding his scornful eye. My face drains of blood. *What if she ran away because of me?*

He hovers a moment. 'Are you okay? Can I get you anything?'

I shake my head and my voice is barely a squeak. 'Just find my little girl.' I yearn to get up and follow him but my body is glued to the chair. I read somewhere that people are born with an inbuilt fight or flight instinct. I was born with neither. Ebony, on the other hand, was always ready to fight, facing down the hatred of my enemies sometimes physically; sometimes using her sharp wit. She was my protector and the more functioning part of me. It was natural for me to let her take charge for most of my life.

Ebb

You slam your bedroom door but it doesn't block out the loud voices. The anger in your father's voice makes you pull the covers over your head. The shoving sounds frighten you the most. 'Can't you do anything right, shit-for-brains? You're such a bloody idiot.' There is a slur in his voice. 'No wonder that kid of ours is so stupid. Argh...' You know what comes next – his favourite catch-phrase. 'I'm living with a bunch of morons! I would be better off without the both of you.'

Run away.

You tremble.

So what if they catch you leaving the house in the middle of the night?

You tiptoe toward the door, glancing back quickly but they are too embroiled in their argument.

How are they ever going to notice?

You slip through the open doorway then glide silently down the stairs. The darkness folds you in its shadowy arms and for the moment, you are safe. You sit on a wooden log, gazing up to the sky. If only the stars could hear your wishes. Tonight you wish for a father who loves you as much as Laura Ingalls' father does on 'Little House on the Prairie'. A father who brings you gifts, and tucks you into bed at night with a loving smile and a story. He'd have brought home that puppy you've always wanted and let it sleep on the end of your bed.

Your father's voice booms above.

So much for the perfect family romance.

You can no longer hear his words but you can tell his anger has grown.

He doesn't even want you here. Why don't you just run away? Creep back up there and pack a few of your favourite things. What does it matter where you go? Anywhere is better than here.

You asked your Mum once if you were adopted in the hope that you could find your real family. Your real father might be just like Mr Ingalls and he'd tell you he loved you and he'd want you to live with him. But your mother told you to stop being so silly. She showed you the scar where they cut you out of her tummy. Your father overheard and sent you to bed with a clip across the ear and no dinner.

This isn't what real families are like. It is you and your Mum who would be better off without him. You could just put a pillow over his head and smother him in his sleep.

Flow

Justin bursts through the door, taking big gulps of air. I look up at the clock and wonder what happened to the time. He has been gone for forty-five minutes. I rise, shaking myself from my trance. 'Did you find her?'

'I've been right along the shore of the lagoon to both boundaries.' He pants between his words. 'She's not there. I'm going to drive down to Bill and Marjorie's place. She might have wandered down there to see the other puppies again.' I watch as he turns to leave.

He still isn't as concerned as you are.

'Wait. I'm coming too.'

Moments later, we are making our way down the driveway in Justin's Jeep in strained silence. I crane my neck to search the sparsely treed spaces. By the time we reach the road, my tongue tastes bitter.

We pull into our neighbour's driveway about a kilometre down the road. One of the bulls protecting its herd lets out a low melancholy bellow that permeates my insides until I want to moan, but I fear I might vomit if I dare to open my mouth. Justin brings the car to a stop and gives the horn a quick toot. Marjorie appears in the doorway as we climb the front stairs, wiping her hands on her apron. She brushes her hair out of her face and a puff of flour escapes. The smell of baking bread wafts from the kitchen behind her. My stomach heaves but nothing comes up. I feel empty.

'Hi, would you like a cuppa?' She peers into the Jeep then asks, 'Is the pup doing okay? Where's Charlie?' The bright smile on her face fades when she sees my pained expression.

'We're looking for Charlie. We can't find her anywhere.' I feel my eyes sting but no tears make it to the surface. They are drowning me from the inside. Marjorie moves toward me with outstretched arms and I fall into her embrace. She smells of butter, and potpourri, and Solvol soap, but it does little to calm me.

'Bill,' she calls over my shoulder as she strokes me in a motherly way.

The hug feels awkward and I pull away as Bill appears from inside the house. He leads Justin across to the barn where Charlie picked out one of their border collie puppies only yesterday. As I watch Bill unbolt the door to the barn, my heart sinks. Charlie would not have been able to reach that door bolt, let alone swing open the heavy wooden door. She is not in the barn. *What if she goes home and we're not there?*

'I'm so sorry, Marjorie. I have to get back.'

'Of course, you go. We'll keep an eye out for her here, I promise.'

I run down the stairs to meet Justin. 'Let's get back to the house. She might come home and go looking for us if we're not there.'

What were you thinking? Just what kind of mother are you?

'I'm such an idiot. I should have stayed there'.

'Calm down, Flow. We haven't been gone that long.'

I glower at him. 'We need to go now!'

'Okay. She can't have got far. We *are* going to find her.' He tries to put his hand on my shoulder but I shirk him. We make our way back to the car in stony silence.

Once home, I rush inside and dash up the hall to Charlie's bedroom. I expect to see her there. I can't let myself believe she is still missing – or worse. Swinging open the door, a deep sense of dread takes hold of me. Something happened here last night. I feel it. I stoop to pick up my abandoned slipper by the door but I still cannot summon any memory of how it got there.

You didn't protect her. Just like your mother didn't protect you.

I sink to my knees in the hall, the cold of the stone reaching up through my bones. I hear Justin in the kitchen on the telephone then hurried footsteps. I whip up my head.

'I'm sorry, Flow. Nobody's seen her.' He pauses, his deep brown eyes finally reflecting the panic in mine. 'I think it's time to call the police.'

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Research statement

Research background

Whitehead proposes trauma literature 'novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms' (2004: 3), utilising narrative strategies such as repetition and fragmentation. This

research aims to better represent the complexity of traumatic images and sensations in crime fiction by drawing upon these elements of trauma narrative, and aligning them with crime fiction conventions that maintain the pace and suspense of the crime genre. Rowan (1990) claims the dissociated subpersonality that may be induced by trauma is capable of acting as a separate identity. This concept is drawn upon in the creative work to represent the impact of trauma in crime fiction, while using these cuts in perspective to aggravate the crime plot and heighten tension.

Research contribution

This text incorporates elements of trauma narrative into crime fiction to develop an original hybrid creative work with a narrative structure that mimics traumatic memory using repetition, through water and drowning motifs, and fragmentation, through cuts in perspective and time. These are aligned with crime fiction conventions in the text by casting the dissociated sub-personalities in first and second tense to create two dialogic voices, which heightens tension in the creation of an unreliable narrator, generates red herrings (false clues), and cliff-hangers where scenes cut to a different perspective. This research aims to develop a framework to classify such hybrid works as a subset of trauma literature.

Research significance

The significance of this hybrid sub-genre is that it can adequately represent the impact of trauma to a genre fiction audience. Other excerpts of this novel-length work have been published in peer-reviewed AAWP conference proceedings.

Works cited

- Rowan, John 1990 *Subpersonalities: the people inside us* London: Routledge
Whitehead, Anne 2004 *Trauma fiction* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP