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Writing, water and woe: the natural environment in *Australian Women's Weekly* feature articles on flood, 1934-2011

Abstract:

By taking as its starting point the concept of magazine exceptionalism, this essay argues that popular magazines such as the *Australian Women's Weekly* play an important, if not always obvious, role in influencing perceptions of the natural environment. This occurs partly through feature articles on what commonly is called natural disaster, which tell stories of human interactions with nature when it behaves in unwelcome ways. Interrogating these stories over time can inform and challenge writing practice. To illustrate, the essay examines *Australian Women's Weekly* feature articles on exceptional floods from 1934 to 2011. It identifies recurring tropes, most notably metaphors of warfare as well as, in some articles, a more ecocentric perspective. Findings are aligned with a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship concerned with the ways in which writers conceptualise non-human others. That scholarship calls for a posthumanist sensibility at a time when anthropogenic climate change will make humans' relations to the natural environment more fraught.

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Keywords:

creative writing – *Australian Women's Weekly* – natural disaster – magazines

Australia occupies a part of the world so threatened by anthropogenic climate change that it is called Disaster Alley (Dunlop & Spratt 2017). Having too much or too little water, a characteristic of Australia's 'boom and bust ecosystems' (Head 2016: 158), increasingly will challenge Australians. The media will continue to report the acute phase of such events as flooding and bushfire. Teachers of journalism can draw on a body of literature that reveals dominant tropes in news coverage of what commonly is called natural disaster (for example, Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle 2012; Kitch & Hume 2008; Furedi 2007; Fry 2003). Some of the literature derives from specific events in Australia (for example, Bohensky & Leitch 2014; Duffy & Yell 2014; Muller 2011; Yell 2010). Writers of popular non-fiction genres, including magazine feature articles, also will be called on to craft stories about natural disaster and as a consequence will project certain perceptions of human relations to the natural environment. However, there is little research to inform their practice in Australia.

This essay intends to contribute to this timely field of inquiry. It arises from and is situated within a larger research project concerned with popular non-fiction genres that may either perpetuate or disrupt dominant perceptions of natural disaster, even if doing so is neither their intent nor immediately obvious. The objective of the essay is to prompt interrogation – by writers and teachers of writing – of the ways in which nature is characterised as a non-human other in such popular non-fiction, noting that in this essay 'nature' is used in a generalised sense for the non-human natural environment. From a disciplinary point of view, the essay positions itself at the intersection of writing studies, magazine studies and journalism studies. It draws on and augments scholarship in those fields, including the literature on disaster reporting cited above, and aligns its findings with rhetorical theory on community formation and with recent scholarship in the environmental humanities. The essay acknowledges a related body of work on the cultural significance of representations of the Australian natural environment (see, for example, Cranston & Dawson 2016; Smith 2011; Carter 1998), full consideration of which is beyond its scope.

Why magazines; why the *Weekly*?

Magazine content informs research in various scholarly disciplines (Holmes 2008: x), and magazines may be objects of study in their own right (Latham & Scholes 2006). For those in the discipline of writing, magazines are of interest in a fundamental way. They are a 'cultural resource ... full of stories which we tell about ourselves, which we make up about ourselves, which we accept as being about ourselves' (Holmes 2008: xiii). Despite their ephemerality, magazines contain stories that potentially have exceptional influence because of magazines' reach and periodicity, and also because of their distinctiveness as cultural products.

The concept of magazine exceptionalism grounds this essay. Abrahamson, who coined the term, argues that the magazine has a unique capacity to reflect yet transform its sociocultural context (2008: 146-47). The extent to which this occurs varies between magazine titles, with some functioning more catalytically than others in effecting change. Magazines' influence derives in part from the closeness between readers, writers and editors, who inhabit the same 'community of interest' (Abrahamson 2008: 146-48), one manifestation of which is the feature article. As Ricketson and Graham observe, '[w]e invite feature articles into our beds or onto our couches and we read them during our leisure time. Feature writers shock us, confide in us, make us feel for other people – we turn to them for entertainment, enlightenment and insight, to answer deep and difficult questions about society and culture' (2017: 80). To put the concept of magazine exceptionalism another way, magazines and the stories they tell function rhetorically through their continual persuasion of readers to affirm or adopt the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of others with whom readers are encouraged to have a close relationship.

The *Australian Women's Weekly* has been one of Australia's most successful general-interest magazines since it began in 1933. Readership currently exceeds 1.4 million (Bauer Media Group). The self-described 'trusted voice of Australian women' has a target audience aged from 25 to 54 for whom, according to the publisher, the magazine 'sets the agenda on what matters most to women' (Bauer Media Group). The *Weekly* has 'a focus on quality long-form journalism' with a mix of 'information and entertainment' that includes 'real-life stories' (Bauer Media Group). Feature articles on Australians' responses to extraordinary events are a means by which the *Weekly* tells the stories which, to borrow from Holmes' generalised comments on magazines, 'we accept as being about ourselves' (2008: xiii).

The *Weekly* is unusual among Australian magazines in that it has inspired a robust body of research (Williamson 2008). Much of that research explores questions around gender and identity, such as Sheridan's (2002) work on the changing role of women in the post-war years as shaped by the *Weekly*'s pages. This essay takes a different approach, by shifting the primary analytical gaze away from representations of women to representations of nature as an abiotic other.

From its outset, the *Weekly* has included content that models readers' relation to nature. Regular features have given advice and instruction on the home garden – what to plant, where and when – and they came to cover native and indigenous as well as exotic plants. Post World War II, a range of content promoted the home garden as a site of pleasure and even creativity (Sheridan 2002: 84). By the mid-1960s, there was a regular, colour feature – 'Beautiful Australia' – that admired Australian topographies. All of this content implicitly promotes the natural environment as something to be controlled or enjoyed, but selectively so. The notion of dualism, predicated on humans as distinct from and superior to all others, has persisted within western culture since Classical times (Simmons 1993: 11-12). Such content in the *Weekly* can be seen to embody this dualistic worldview.

In 1934, its second year, the *Weekly* published a feature article that heralded another, if intermittent, type of content: stories of nature as intractable. It reported on major flooding in the state of Victoria along with other events arising from extreme weather elsewhere in Australia. The article spends much time bemoaning the consequent inconveniences to 'the worst sufferers', women whose 'household arrangements are thrown out of gear' ('What on earth' 1934: 2). At various points, however, are sentences that concern matters other than disruption of domestic routines. When these sentences are extracted and placed together, they form a shorter piece with its own coherence. It identifies that summer's weather as 'a problem no one is able to solve' (2). The weather 'has become more than a topic of conversation' because '[i]t is an outstanding event', even 'a portent –and a menacing one' (2). An answer is sought: 'What is the reason for this extraordinary change in what we are taught to believe is an ordered and regular sequence?' (2). 'It is an age of science,' says the *Weekly*, which goes on to cite 'the New South Wales weather man', who views the unusual weather in a global context: "'This year, all over the world, the weather ... has been abnormal. Many places have experienced the greatest of extremes. Droughts, floods, severe cold, have been found everywhere. The Australian experience has therefore been in keeping with the rest of the world'" (2). He attributes the Australian weather to a 'tropical "airflow"' and says that the cause of the worldwide phenomenon is under investigation but most likely is "'variations which take place in the radiations from the sun'" (2).

Aspects of the 1934 article now seem anachronistic, but the concern with the cause of what is perceived as abnormal weather is a very contemporary one. The (anonymous) writer in 1934 assumed what would now be seen as a narrowly gendered preoccupation with the disruption to home and family brought about by inclement weather. Simultaneously, however, readers'

attention was directed beyond mundane worries – about, for instance, what to wear during prolonged wet weather – toward the scientific basis of comparable events worldwide. Over eight decades later, natural disaster and its link to anthropogenic climate change is a subject prominent in the public domain. Some questions about the *Weekly* arise here: whether the magazine has sustained its curiosity about unusual weather since 1934; how, if at all, stories of extreme weather have evolved in their depiction of the natural world; and what the implications are for those who now craft stories of natural disaster.

To begin to answer these questions, this essay reports the findings of a study of *Weekly* feature articles on flooding since 1934. It answers a call for more longitudinal studies of media content on the natural environment (Hansen 2015: 386-387) and augments a body of scholarship that encourages writers to reconceptualise representations of non-human others in non-fiction writing (for example, Williamson 2018; Carlin 2017; Levene 2013). The study involves all *Weekly* feature stories on floods in 1934, 1955, 1974, 1986, 1990 and 2011. Each of these years experienced flooding that caused extensive damage, as indicated by data provided by the Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub (AIDR). An exhaustive study of *Weekly* flood stories, or natural disaster stories overall, is beyond the scope of this essay, but the years chosen and the focus on flood do enable a close and coherent examination of *Weekly* content on natural disaster across some eighty years since the magazine's beginning. The study is based on the 'informal approach' of qualitative research through which repeated reading of empirical material reveals themes and so 'draw[s] a picture of the presuppositions and meanings that constitute the cultural world of which the textual material is a specimen' (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori 2018: 670). The study concentrates on textual components of the articles and, to a lesser extent, visual elements that highlight the written word and relates its findings to writing practice.

Nature as nuisance, foe and victim

For readers of the *Weekly* in 1934, flooding was but one symptom of a season gone awry. Unusual weather caused summer to be 'bad' and go 'astray', resulting in human tragedy, economic loss, depression and no end of bother for women as homemakers ('What on earth' 1934: 2). Nature is described anthropomorphically: 'Skies ... alternately threaten and weep; clouds ... hang around with grim persistence; ... mornings ... break menacingly' (2). Mid-way through, the article tells of separate events in three states: storms and flooding in South Australia and in Victoria, and unseasonable cold in Sydney, New South Wales. The single image – a young girl occupied with what appears to be needlework – has the caption, 'A VICTIM OF the weather. This little girl is sitting on the verandah of her ruined home in a Melbourne suburb. Bad weather has been world-wide this year. Some experts say it's due to a spot on the sun' (2). Encapsulated here is the *Weekly*'s shifting of readers' attention away from domestic and local matters toward global and scientific contexts.

Just over two decades later, in 1955, the *Weekly* covered major flooding in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales. Some aspects of the coverage resemble its precursor from 1934; other aspects represent a departure and establish norms for feature articles in subsequent decades. Those norms arise from the *Weekly*'s conceptualisation of flood as a discrete event rather than as part of a larger phenomenon as in 1934, and as an entity with its own character. This occurs in different pieces across two issues in 1955: a pictorial spread ('State's worst floods' 1955), two feature articles on residents' experiences (Woods 1955; 'Flood aftermath' 1955), and a shorter piece encouraging donations to the flood appeal ('You, too' 1955). Anybody turning the magazine's pages would notice the dominance of photographs – of floodwaters and damage from the air and on the ground, and of survivors – that create the impression of water overwhelming all. Anthropomorphism appears again but is confined to expressions of

anger and conflict. Two captions refer to the 'raging waters' ('State's worst floods' 1955: 20, 21), as does the opening of one article ('You, too' 1955: 2). The flood is a foe against which residents had been 'fighting' for over two weeks ('Flood aftermath' 1955: 20). Its destruction of the built environment is described viscerally: homes become 'slime-filled shambles'; Maitland is 'a town of filth and despair' instead of 'a clean, thriving city' (Woods 1955: 21). The flood even wages war against the landscape: 'thousands of square miles of peaceful, prosperous countryside were suddenly obliterated by an angry sea'; 'flood waters roared across defenceless plains and valleys'; much of New South Wales 'lies maimed and crippled' ('You, too' 1955: 2). Despite this grim picture, readers of the *Weekly* could take heart from the human goodness inspired by nature's malevolence, evidence of which pervades the articles, especially that entitled 'Shining heroism is the glory of the floods' (Woods 1955).

The next exceptional flood covered by the *Weekly* was in 1974, when Brisbane, capital city of Queensland, was inundated by the river flowing through its centre. The first article was a pictorial spread documenting what occurred when the flood 'struck Brisbane', including through an image of a 'home' that had become 'a heartache' ('Brisbane's flood calamity' 1974: 2, 10). The second article was written by an eyewitness to the devastation. It concentrates on the 'massive clean-up', especially of mud in the home as illustrated by several images of domestic ruin and one of the writer 'up to her ankles ... in mud' (Bruce 1974: 4). Seeing the aftermath is akin to 'viewing London's bomb-shattered areas right after the end of World War II' (Bruce 1974: 4), with nature the aggressor: 'Looking through the big lounge windows, over what was once a landscaped garden, the Brisbane River about 100 yards away was now a sluggish, sullen brown – a change from the rampaging, destroying torrent of a few days before' (Bruce 1974: 4). As in 1955, the writer praises those involved in the flood. She 'found an amazing courage ... determination to do what had to be done – and start again', as well as 'comradeship and help of others' (Bruce 1974: 4).

The *Weekly* in 1986 and 1990 revisited what by now are familiar themes. Nature once again waged war when Sydney flooded in 1986. The feature article, about the street in which one of the magazine's editors lived, describes torrential rain that 'pounded the city like an unrelenting barrage of bullets' and 'whipped and roared' (Duncan 1986: 6). The 1990 feature on the flooding of Nyngan, New South Wales, is sub-headed, 'When they saw disaster coming, the people stood and fought. But theirs was an enemy no-one could beat' ('Nyngan's days' 1990: 22). Residents were engaged in a 'battle'; the town is 'a watery graveyard' (23). The article finally pays tribute to 'the victims who fought so hard against the flood, and are fighting again, to re-build their lives' (25). Water is 'raging' in 1986 and 1990 (Duncan 1986: 6; 'Nyngan's days' 1990: 22), yet Australians shine. The flood peak 'was a night of tragedy, a night of fear and, ultimately, of courage ... a night ordinary men and women discovered how it felt to be heroes' (Duncan 1986: 6). The 'courage' of Nyngan residents who tried to save their town is unforgettable ('Nyngan's days' 1990: 22). As in 1974, nature's ire extends to the destruction of the home garden: an old, eighteen-metre high pine tree becomes 'a victim of the flood' (Duncan 1986: 9), and 'well-tended gardens' are 'submerged or swept away' ('Nyngan's days' 1990: 22).

The final feature article examined in this essay covers flooding in early 2011, when large parts of Queensland and Brisbane were submerged. As in preceding decades, the resilience of communities is a theme reinforced by images of residents braving floodwaters, but now it is inflected patriotically through references to 'stoic courage and good old Aussie resilience' (Williams 2011: 28) and '[t]he great Aussie spirit' (31). However, reading further reveals a natural environment more nuanced than the enemy characterised by the *Weekly* from the 1950s to 1990s. Despite the brutal damage done – 'Queensland is engulfed' (Williams 2011: 28), homes are 'flood-ravaged' (31), 'large swathes of Queensland battled to survive' (31), a

flooded river 'swallows' a city (32) – the article uses metaphors of warfare less overtly and extensively than in its predecessors. If anything, floodwater is the result of a predictable, and predicted, phenomenon and is itself vulnerable. This is conveyed through two striking – red background, white print – sidebar blocks of text, one beneath an image of a family wading through floodwaters (31), the other superimposed on an aerial view of the flooded city of Rockhampton (33). The first, 'Who to blame?', provides information on the La Nina weather pattern associated with wet summers. It cites a senior hydrologist at the Bureau of Meteorology, which had predicted unusually high rainfall that summer, and reprints his words in capital letters – 'We've been predicting this for months, but it's very sad to see it come to fruition' – three pages later. The second, 'Where the water is going', outlines marine scientists' fear of industrial chemicals polluting floodwaters and flowing out to sea or into river systems. In each case, the *Weekly* exposes readers to a perspective more attuned to the natural environment – its established cycles, its vulnerability to harm – than was typical of articles in earlier decades.

To move to a general observation, the feature articles from 1934 to 2011 make little mention of the natural environment relative to how much is said about the travails and triumphs of people. This is unsurprising: magazines generally place 'a premium on the human-interest value of stories' (Ricketson & Graham 2017: 31). Feature articles on disaster typically are of the human-interest type that enables readers to experience vicariously others' involvement in extraordinary events and so 'are about emotion first and information second' (Ricketson & Graham 2017: 56). Despite its complexity, the natural environment overall is represented perfunctorily and then primarily in terms of its accentuation of human qualities. Attempting to tell another side of the story – why, when, how a river floods, and any ecological benefits – arguably is better suited to another type of article or even magazine.

Two of the articles – in 1934 and 2011 – do suggest otherwise, if in a limited way. Readers of each are expected, or directed, to be scientifically curious. Structurally, this occurs differently: in 1934, through an embedded narrative beyond that concerning domestic life; in 2011, through visually arresting blocks of informational text. By including expert meteorological advice, the articles more closely resemble each other than those of intervening decades. However, none of the features recognise other forms of knowledge about flooding as an ecological phenomenon, notably those of Indigenous Australians.

In flood stories from 1955 to 1990, the adversarial relation between nature and people is a default position for writers and is manifest to varying degrees in metaphors of warfare. Supplementing these metaphors are before-and-after contrasts which serve to highlight the destruction of what *Weekly* readers hold dear: the home and garden. Apart from indicating thematic consistency in the *Weekly* across these decades, the persistence of the nature-at-war-with-the-people trope aligns the magazine with journalistic practice in Australia and more broadly. To illustrate, the 2011 front page of the special flood edition of Queensland's *Courier-Mail* newspaper (14 January) was headlined 'Defiance' and referred to people beginning their 'fightback'. Metaphors of warfare recur in reports of natural disaster in the US, both in the print news (Kitch & Hume 2008: 10-12) and the television news, such as that covering floods in the 1990s (Fry 2003: 95-97).

There are good reasons for basing stories of flood on conflict between nature and people. Doing so activates a cultural script likely to be familiar to readers. That script expresses a 'hierarchical dualism' delineating nature and culture, which for Australians is inflected by the stereotype of the 'battler' who perseveres against the odds and for whom from colonial times the land has frustrated attempts at controlled settlement (Rigby 2015: 13). 'Battling' the land and climate has, in the words of Robin, 'made [Australians] the citizens [they] are today'

(2010: 7). Rhetorically, the exploitation of the nature-culture binary serves to unite an imperilled community – whether it is the community directly involved in the flood, or a state or national community experiencing the flood vicariously – against a common foe. Hart (1998) asks whether the conceptual formation of a community can occur without establishing an oppositional relation to others who for some reason are excluded from the community. While Hart's question concerns an antipathetic dynamic between groups of people, it can be extended to abiotic others with which humans interact. When previously benign parts of the landscape – creek, river, lake – metamorphose into flood, nature functions as what Hart calls 'uncommunity', an other that has 'mindfully chosen a course different from our own and pursued it with abandon' (1998: xxv). Apart from their generalised utility as an established trope with rhetorical serviceability, metaphors of warfare are especially apt for the *Weekly*, for which the destruction of home and garden represents an affront to values central to its readership.

To be inferred from the discussion so far is that any ecocentric sensitivity to natural disaster is confined to the *Weekly*'s 1934 and 2011 issues; however, further work is needed to determine the extent to which this ecocentric sensitivity is present in articles other than those included in this study. For example, the September 1986 issue, which covers the Sydney floods, also contains a piece about pollution of Sydney's last sizeable urban wetland system. It opens with a story about migratory birds travelling to Botany Bay, after which the *Weekly* addresses the birds' 'vulnerability', which 'symbolizes the threat to life generally in a society where nature and technology compete' (Munday et al. 1986: 109). More recently, the January 2018 issue reports briefly on wildfires in California and quotes the state's governor, who 'described the situation as "the new normal" and suggested that, as the impacts of climate change intensify, "this could be something that happens every year or every few years"' ('Aussie fireys' 2018: 12). Whether over time *Weekly* content extends to similar topics and acknowledgment of anthropogenic causes of natural disaster will be investigated within the larger research project of which this essay is a part.

A climate for change

Following the 2017 Australasian Association of Writing Programs conference, and in the early weeks of the southern hemisphere summer, the Australian weather typically was in the news. Parts of Victoria had unusually high rainfall. The Bureau of Meteorology declared the eastern side of the continent to be in a La Nina phase, although less severely than in 2011 (Doyle & Deacon 2017). The bureau again made the news with advice that 2017 had been Australia's third-hottest year on record (Doyle 2018). It drew on historical records to apprise Australians of the link between record-breaking weather and global warming.

Just as Australians now may be informed by an historical view of their weather, so too may writers and teachers of writing learn from looking to the past. The *Weekly*'s feature article from 1934 embodies a lively curiosity about unusual weather that arguably is unequalled by the later features examined in this essay, many of which rely on tropes used so repeatedly as to be clichés. Bearing in mind the concept of magazine exceptionalism referenced earlier, this finding potentially raises many points of enquiry in the classroom, around the rhetorical function of magazines as repositories for stories 'which we accept as being about ourselves' (Holmes 2008: xiii), the suitability of those stories to the Anthropocene and its climatic exigencies, and the capacity of the writer to influence the habitual perceptions of readers or to incite action.

Admittedly, such points of enquiry may not translate easily into practice outside of the classroom, given that any diversion from established conventions occurs in an industry context. Ricketson and Graham give salutary reminders of the practical considerations for

magazine writers and editors who 'must know and respond to readers' needs, desires, hopes, fears and aspirations' (2017: 79) and who recognise, for example, that readers may be ambivalent about the inclusion of expert opinion in feature stories (90). For readers, flood stories of people as victims attacked by nature may be plausible and affirming representations of an experience relatively common in Australia. Nevertheless, Ricketson and Graham caution against writing made dull by excessive concern with readers' preferences and suggest a market for stories with fresh approaches to known topics, even if such stories may require more effort to make them palatable to readers (2017: 91-92).

To that end, and while not necessarily leading to either immediate or dramatic changes, scholarly calls for fresh approaches to conceptualising human-nature relations can inform writing practice and pedagogy. In pondering life in the Anthropocene, Head makes an assertion potentially challenging when applied to writing practice: 'The notion that humans do things to nature, or vice versa, is seen as impossibly oversimplified and empirically inaccurate. Assemblages of many things – some people, some animals, some plants, some ideas, some laws, some bacteria, some atmospheric molecules – are in a constant process of both change and stability' (2016: 155). Moving to natural disaster more specifically, Rigby contests the very term, the usage of which dates to the later nineteenth century (2015: 9), because it 'conjures a cultural narrative that is liable to foster a hostile attitude toward the natural world at the very time when we most need to appreciate the connectivities, both material and moral, linking human well-being with that of other living beings and with those volatile bio-physical systems that both enable and, at times, endanger our collective flourishing' (13). A body of interdisciplinary work – represented by, for example, Williamson (2018), Carlin (2017), Levene (2013) and Plumwood (2007) – explores the ways in which writers conceptualise non-human others, including abiotic others. Such work suggests that, '[i]n situating the human within the bigger context of the more-than-human, we are called upon to change the ways we think and act; and moreover the stories that we tell and how we tell them' (Carlin 2017: 5).

Stories of nature behaving badly are culturally inculcated, so it is expeditious to retell them. However, writers of popular non-fiction and teachers of writing now work at a time in which anthropogenic climate change will make human relations to the natural environment more fraught as extreme weather occurs more often. It is a time that calls for a posthumanist sensibility to crafting those stories about what is now called natural disaster. Admittedly, the possibility of writing from anything but an essentially anthropocentric point of view is debatable. However, as some of the *Weekly* feature articles show, it is possible to tell stories that at the very least admit causes and effects beyond the spurious notion of nature waging war against people. In other words, the magazine may nudge readers toward an awareness of other stories that intersect with, but are very much bigger than, the human.

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