

**Griffith University**

**Nigel Krauth**

**Polonaise in F Sharp Minor, Opus 44**

Biographical note:

Associate Professor Nigel Krauth is head of the writing program at Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia. He has published four novels (two of them national award winners), three teenage novels, along with stories, essays, articles and reviews. His research investigates creative writing processes and the teaching of creative writing. He is the co-founding editor of *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* [www.textjournal.com.au](http://www.textjournal.com.au)

Keywords:

creative writing – creative nonfiction – Christopher Skase

### **The disgraced media-mogul**

Christopher Skase fled to Majorca in 1991 at 43 years of age to avoid corporate fraud charges. Alongside Ned Kelly, he's the most famous fugitive in Australian history. He escaped to Majorca and holed up in an 'impenetrable hideaway ... a mansion by the sea in paradise,' according to the newspapers. At the disintegration of his tourism and media empire (a collapse finally occasioned when he bought MGM studios in Hollywood and then couldn't pay for them) he owed big banks 1.7 billion dollars. These banks – American, Asian, Australian, British and French – included the Bank of America, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and Barclays.

At the time when his company, Quintex, crumpled, he owned luxury hotels and resort chains, television and radio networks, real estate developments, hydrofoil services, jewellery stores, yachting marinas, Rolls-Royces and the most expensive house in the state of Queensland – a Mediterranean-style palace overlooking the Brisbane River with colonnaded walkways surrounding patio and pool, tennis and squash courts, cinema and bomb shelter. On a shelf in the study stood a glass globe containing the shredded notes of the first million dollars he made. Randolph Hearst was Skase's role model.

When it all went bust, Skase fled the good life in Australia for the good life in Majorca. He took up residence in a luxury estate west of Palma, from which the Australian authorities – in ten years of legal battles – never dislodged him. Claiming he was dying of emphysema, he regularly appeared before the media in a wheelchair with the paraphernalia of oxygen mask and bottle attached. He maintained that he'd die if forced to travel, and that his threatened deportation was 'attempted murder in the first degree'. He backed his claims with medical reports from the most expensive Swiss doctors. In 2001 the saga ended with Skase's reported death at just 53, from stomach cancer, not emphysema.

### **The bus to Port Andraitx**

escapes the old town and proceeds along the garish strip of beach resorts. I see names like *Huckleberry's Beach Bar*, *Snoopy's*, and *Miracles*. *Club Liquid*. *Moby Dick Garage*. *Autos Bonsai*. *Plastic Gym Club*. I see two canine hair salons in a single block, along with a veterinary clinic. There are marinas and golf courses repeated, and brassy tourist attractions. Towards Palma Nova the resorts inundate the orchards, the red dirt lies dug and heaped, like scar tissue. The developments reach out towards Skase in his Port Andraitx hideaway, and are truly tacky, some of them kitsch travesties on a palatial scale. But the bushy inland hills, and the occasional old chapel, reminds of how we once were.

Majorca is a holiday island, I remind myself. A developer's dream ... many developers' dreams. And it's a Mediterranean retirement paradise – retirement being a kind of holiday anyway. There are tourists everywhere. Hire vehicles take wrong turns, or stall on roundabouts, drivers consulting maps and GPS screens. At Paguera – the ultimate holiday ghetto – the street is packed with painfully pink people carrying blow-up mattresses

towards the sea. All middle-aged; as middle-aged as I am, at least. And there are endless hotel pools surrounded by banana loungers. From the height of the bus I can see over the walls a vast real estate of reddening flesh.

The bus winds tightly in the new streets of Paguera, and takes on a bevy of holidaymakers – unwaveringly cheery and talkative. I feel I'm on the bus to happy home, the people-mover to paradise. All nationalities are aboard. The women have short permed hair. The men wear golf caps. At Camp de Mar a brand new resort town with imitation hillside villages rises up the foothill. The 'instant history' look – medieval Catalonia with golf course.

### **The taxi for the quick trip**

around the bay, unloads me at Skase's gate. *Calle Ramat I, esquina Cala Egos, Puerto Andraitx, Mallorca, Espagne*, it says on the letter box. Not a hard address to find, even if I think the taxi drivers have been paid off to act dumb about it. So much for the media notions of a 'hideaway'. As I arrive I see the watchtower of Skase's mansion, recognisable from the media photos. I know I'm in the right place. A red MG flashes by and I think I see Skase driving it. Skase-spotting is a pastime in Port Andraitx, I guess.

I stand on the dirt road in front of the place. Walls, watchtower, buildings set back. I hear a rooster crow twice. Through barred gates I see Skase's swimming pool. Two silver plastic blow-up armchairs float eerily empty on it. I get a *Great Gatsby* shiver. There's a bougainvillea-draped colonnade and patio beside it. There are other mansions looking down from the surrounding hills. His estate, without elevation, looks inviting, but doesn't suggest freedom, or impenetrability, to me.

How hidden away is he? In the Port I bought two postcards that show his place from across the bay. But I'd say that most of the plush homes surrounding his two acres were built since Skase got here. He's sitting in the middle of a real estate development boom. It must be driving him crazy! The two sides of the bay are built up, but the flat tract at the end of it is not yet developed. I can see the Andraitx Mirage, shimmering, in his mind.

I scope his gates. I look for security cameras but can't see any. I press the button. There's no reply. I could leap his wall, at least with some help from stuff in his dumpster, outside the gates. A feature film made about him suggested his estate had a laser-beam intruder-protection system. Nothing could be further from the truth. I press the button again and again. Skase is not at home.

The dumpster by the gate is full of cardboard boxes: the kind removalists use. I start going through them. There's a lot of thrown-away personal stuff. Papers, bathroom items, dog food cans. I'm sifting among the detritus of lives – Christopher and wife Pixie. Eventually I know I'm at a point where I'm not myth-hunting anymore; I'm invading his privacy.

'Looking for something?'

I turn, and a man in his late 30s with the build of a rugby front-rower is standing behind the bars of the gate.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I’m looking for Chris. I’m Nigel Krauth.’

‘You got an appointment?’

I say no. But I add that I’ve met him before, on the Gold Coast, when he and Pixie were regular restaurant-goers in Main Beach and Surfers.

‘How do you spell your name?’

I do it and he writes it on the back of his hand.

‘Wait a minute,’ he says.

The footballer goes away. I’m pretty sure he is Tony Larkins, Skase’s stepson-in-law and marshal-at-arms. I keep watching the gate and there’s probably time for someone to google me and then the gates start to glide inwards. I walk through, around the pool, and under the colonnaded patio.

### **Chris Skase, sitting in his wheelchair**

with his oxygen mask and bottle, greets me. We shake hands, and I’m careful not to grip his hand too hard, considering his condition, but there’s plenty of strength in his grasp and I’m heartened. I’m aware of the big, cool room embracing the swimming pool and patio and colonnades. I get the impression I’m on the set for the Ponderosa lounge room in *Bonanza* – all dark stones, heavy timbers and vast leather cushioning, though I don’t think they had a swimming pool on the Ponderosa. I see Pixie – blonde, petite and gorgeous – standing just behind Chris, holding the handles of his wheelchair. She really is another Bridget Bardot, older, of course. She glides towards me. She gives me a Mediterranean greeting, the two-cheek graze-cum-kiss, and invites me to sit (but I can’t help sprawling) on a sensational leather couch, then she goes and sits in the background.

Skase takes his oxygen mask off. ‘Main Beach,’ he says.

‘Tedder Avenue,’ I say. ‘But other places too. I was never really *in* your parties. Just happened to be there at the time. But your parties always expanded to include those around.’

He grips the arm of his wheelchair and cracks a smile. ‘Yes. They did. That’s what was meant to happen.’ He looks across at Pixie. She’s smiling too. ‘So, you want to talk to me, but I know you’re not a journalist. In fact, I know you’re a novelist.’

I’ve had this before. It’s sometimes surprising who has read your books. People who’ve read my novels include film stars, prime ministers, and even other novelists. My publisher tells me these things. But in Skase’s case now, perhaps he just read my home page.

‘I’m an anarchist,’ I confess. ‘Everything you’ve done has amused me greatly. But also, as a novelist, I’m aware it’s only journalists have written about you.’

He gets animated. ‘Yes, they’ve written about me. But they’ve never understood me. It’s not just about facts, you know, it’s about psychology. No-one has captured how I think.’

‘But you’ve written your own account,’ I say.

‘Agh, it’s crap,’ he says. ‘I forgot a long time ago how to write. And I did it badly then anyway.’

### **Skase gets up from his wheelchair**

and walks towards the grand piano in a further reach of the lounge room, beside the broad fireplace. Pixie stands and wheels the chair behind him as he goes. At the piano he sits into the chair again and starts to play.

He plays Chopin. He plays it beautifully. Pixie retrieves his oxygen mask and bottle and brings it to him. She places the mask over his face as he says, as if introducing himself in performance: ‘A selection of pieces by Frédéric Chopin. Chopin wrote exquisite stuff here in Valldemossa, a village between Port Andraitx and Deyá, where George Sand and Chopin famously had their affaire. It’s one of the most beautiful villages in the world.’

‘I’ve seen it,’ I say. ‘I went through it in a bus.’

‘Ah. Then you’ll know,’ he says.

After a moody piece, then a whimsical one, he launches into Polonaise in A Major, Opus 40, No 1. Amongst the most recognisable and rousing pieces of music ever, it is demanding and playful and sexy. It hits you in the heart and the groin. You want to stamp your boots and whirl yourself in an abandoned, fierce Catalan way.

Behind him Pixie starts to dance. She swirls her see-through pool coat about her. She writhes up to his wheelchair as he bangs it out, straight-backed and fingers stamping on the keyboard. It’s a brilliant moment, I feel I should look away, but don’t want to miss a beat as she rolls her hips and he pounds the keyboard. Pixie is going like a flamenco dancer, and Chris is blazing away, misting up his mask, and I’m snapping my fingers and feeling my bum moving on the couch like it wants to take off and my fists fly with the music, emphasising every beat...

The piece finishes and echoes around the furniture. He turns and looks at us. I applaud wildly and Pixie throws her arms over his shoulders, snuggling her head in his neck, her long hair shimmying.

He turns back to the piano, and I realize he isn’t reading from any manuscripts. ‘And here is Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in B Flat Minor, Opus 35: the presto finale. Also written in that Carthusian monastery cell in Valldemossa, where he and George Sand were holed up, screwing in defiance of the world, him dying, her trying to support him in the face of international derision ...’

He launches into the most disturbing piece of music I've ever heard. I'm amazed he knows how to play it. It sounds like it's being played backwards. So avant-garde, I don't believe it was written 150 years ago. It seems to tear the guts out of the piano. It certainly tears the guts out of my brain. It rolls like the nastiest of viruses, never a melody, only a sub-text. It upsets me, I want to turn it off. Pixie grips him from behind.

'We're talking about psychology here, Nigel,' he calls out through the mask. 'This is my psychology. It's taken me a lifetime of practice to be able to play this. It was Chopin's in Valldemossa, it's also mine.'

At the end of the piece Chris is distressed and Pixie strokes him down. She takes off the mask so he can breathe more easily. From within her embrace he says: 'And here is one of my favourites, written in Valldemossa and surely the soundtrack to any ambitious real estate development worth its salt. Polonaise in F Sharp Minor, Opus 44. It's a long work – all real estate is long work.'

I sit through a quarter-hour of dramatic piano playing. The piece seems all about possibility, persistence, negotiation, crests of creative achievement followed by valleys of disappointment.

'I have a plan for Valldemossa,' he says, over the music. 'It's submitted and approved. Where Chopin composed some of his best works, we have composed the Chopin Estate. Sixty acres with spectacular views down the Valldemossa Valley, a spectacular golf course, sprawling blocks, all facilities.'

He works away at the keyboard, throwing himself into the music as much as the telling of his beautiful dream.

'Development is about doing good and making beautiful things and vistas, about dreaming and having vision. But developers are always misunderstood – that is, until they're forgotten when the beauty of what they created eclipses them.'

Chris claws at the piano. The Polonaise seems to demand tenaciousness to the point of despair, but he sticks at it, the sweat beading his forehead. And then, there comes a rousing final passage where I recognize the developer looking happily at his final bank account – or the composer looking at his completed manuscript.

'There's a prospectus on the table over there. You're welcome to take it when you leave,' he grunts, slumping on the keyboard.

Pixie has half-danced, half-massaged her way through this piece, and she announces: 'Why don't we swim?' She swirls her gauzy pool coat and it balloons around her. She laughs coquettishly and heads out the wide French doors towards the pool.

### **I'm ready for anything, and stand up**

to follow her. I see she's discarding her robe and her bikini bits so I look back at Chris and he's up and out of his chair and unbuttoning his trousers as he moves and I realize I

must get naked to join the party. As Chris hits the water, man-bits dangling, I'm not far behind. We bounce and splash and set the pool furniture on collision courses.

Pixie throws the water from her hair and eyes. 'We haven't had this much fun in months,' she laughs.

We hold arms together. We tread water and dive around and look at each other underwater. We get out and sit on the edge, and drip, and get back in. We feel each other sharing the water. The afternoon sun beats down on the good life in Majorca, the cerise blast of the bougainvillea sways above the turquoise of the pool. Chris floats on his back and squirts a jet of water from his mouth and says: 'I want you to write that novel about me.'

I'm flattered. I'm speechless. Pixie swims up and grabs me. 'He's serious,' she says.

I demur. I say I can't do the cause justice. Chris swims over and grabs me too. 'I want you to do it,' he grins.

Pixie throws back her head and laughs delightedly. 'Let's celebrate,' she hoots. She calls to someone inside the house to bring out the Cava.

### **I walk to the electric gates**

knowing I love the idea of Chris as pursued Ned Kelly, as doomed Icarus, as reincarnated Chopin. I admire his imagination, his style, his sense of humour, his overreaching, his embattledness, his play with authority, his up-yours creativity, his holding the love of his nymph, Pixie. I'm wrestling with the idea that he's a cultural hero, even perhaps a cultural saint, because he has exposed what global business is really about. Its politics, glamour, celebrity, power – and its profits – aren't other than what you manage to get away with. Chris didn't get away with it, but he refused martyrdom. He fled and didn't face the courts, chose to do so because the courts aren't moral, they're the sledgehammer of the banks, businesses and governments which haven't been caught out yet. Skase redefined morality in business, as only an outsider could. He captained one ship in the fleet of greed, and went to the bottom with it.

'I'm thinking of proposing you for a sainthood,' I say, as the gates close between us.

Chris has his oxygen mask on again, and Pixie is at his side. I'm still not sure if the mask is a prop or a necessity. He's looking at me with a Byronic passion – with that clear, pallid, formal, ironic Byronic look about him. I've heard that Chris entertains very special guests in the pool shed across from the colonnaded patio. I'm thinking I could have done a gentle round with him, on his agenda. I'm happy to contemplate anything he might give me, or I might give him – I'm a writer on a mission, after all. Then Pixie speaks up.

'It's been wonderful meeting you, Mr Krauth. I think Chris is getting tired now.'

Pixie is a gorgeous woman and I'm distracted by her as much as I am by St Christopher. We have already cheek-grazed on the other side of the gate, but I hold Skase's handshake gratefully for a long time, and he holds on too, through the bars.

The silver plastic blow-up armchairs bump eerily on the pool, swirling a little, pinkened in the sunset behind them. I get that *Great Gatsby* shiver again. The barred gate clicks firmly locked behind me and I'm on my way back to Palma.



## Research statement

### Research background

Popular conceptions maintain that fiction results purely from imagination, but the relationship between fact and fiction has occupied philosophy and literature for centuries. Novelists since Aphra Behn (*Oroonoko*, 1688) have confirmed fact's importance in making fiction, while Chimamanda Adichie defined fiction's 'emotional truth' as 'a quality more resilient than fact' (2007: 9). Yet literary controversies such as those attached to Demidenko, Frey and Khouri indicate how anxiously some readers (and writers) negotiate the terrain between fact and fiction.

### Research contribution

This work observes a collision between fact and fiction, information and impression, the objective and the subjective, and the real and the imagined. It wants the unsettled reader to muse: 'Did this really happen? Perhaps it did?'. It accomplishes this by presenting incontrovertible facts with outrageous imaginings so the two become difficult to unravel, thus challenging instituted ethics related to literary deceptions in order to explore what sort of fictive experience will evolve.

### Research significance

Investigating the spectrum of positions between fact and fiction, this story does not valorise fiction above fact, or vice-versa. It observes the reaction between the two. It seeks to investigate the long-asserted, canonical boundary between fact and fiction from yet another angle – that of the fictional character inserted (photoshop-like) into a reality-like situation.

### Works cited

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