

## Australian Author Marion Halligan – Word Artist Robyn Greaves

Australian author Marion Halligan writes about the paintings of Pierre Bonnard in her memoir, *The Taste of Memory*: ‘I realised his paintings are very much like novels.’<sup>1</sup> They ‘set up in us the desire to know ... There will never be answers to the Bonnard questions, not from him, though we can enjoy the puzzles; the way we live our lives is our answer. The questions are our business, the luminous moments are paint on canvas, they want us to gaze, they invite us to dwell in their dazzlement’ (*TM* 214-16). Halligan is a word artist. Her words ‘invite us to dwell in their dazzlement’ as she creates ‘luminous moments’ on the canvas of the page. Halligan is adept at capturing details we recognise in our own lives and weaving poignant, thought-provoking stories out of them; stories about how ‘ordinary’ people cope in the face of events that we all experience at some point, such as loss, grief and bereavement. Like the modernists before her, such as Virginia Woolf, Halligan sees art as the place in which to search for answers to life’s puzzles. While acknowledging that the answers are never definitive, that art alone and of itself is not the only answer, she sees it as a place to map out experience; to step back from it and discern its message to us. For Woolf, ‘the whole world is a work of art’ and ‘we are parts of the work of art.’<sup>2</sup> Woolf’s art form is essential to her life; she considers it a writer’s ‘business’ to ‘collect’ what they see and ‘communicate it to the rest of us.’<sup>3</sup> Similarly, for Halligan, ‘it is artists showing you what they see that educates the heart, in novels, in paintings, in photographs.’<sup>4</sup> Like Woolf, she is a passionate advocate for her art and has written about it in essays and fiction over the years.

Halligan’s first novel, *Self Possession*, was published in 1987. Since then she has published around twenty novels and collections of short stories. Her novels have been well-received and have won numerous awards, including the Age Book of the Year for *Lovers’ Knots* (1992). She has received a number of fellowships from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and won the inaugural Geraldine Pascall Prize for critical writing in 1990. Most recently, her short stories ‘A Willowy Woman’ and ‘Eating Oysters’ are included in the *Best Australian Stories 2012* and *Best Australian Stories 2013* respectively, and ‘A Castle in Toorak’ appears in *Griffith REVIEW* 42, 2013. Just as Bonnard is said to have “‘discovered strange and wonderful countries even in boudoirs and drawing-rooms”” (*TM* 220), Halligan’s fiction draws on details of everyday life: the domestic or suburban realm. For Halligan, suburbia is a rich source of material; it is ‘where life happens, where people live and love one another and raise their children, where there is grief and recrimination and murder and pain, it is where the human comedy unfolds’ (166). The general perception of life in the suburban or domestic realm as nondescript and banal is perhaps a reason why Halligan’s work, due to its subject matter, has been critically neglected or overlooked.

Dorothy Jones, one of the few academics to analyse Halligan’s work, writes:

<sup>1</sup> Marion Halligan, *The Taste of Memory* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2004) 214.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978) 72.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 2013 [1929]) 108.

<sup>4</sup> Halligan, ‘Where Truth Lies’ *Meanjin* 64.1-2 (2005): 95-100.

Marion Halligan's writing dwells on the pleasures of daily life, and while readers can readily connect with this celebration of ordinariness, recognising in it patterns of our own existence, such subject matter can also provoke doubt, even distrust ... Continuing doubts as to whether suburbia is an appropriate subject for serious literature can result in writers who explore it being dismissed as bourgeois.<sup>5</sup>

This is an issue Halligan feels strongly about. In a personal interview she comments: 'the sort of writing that I do, if done by men is highly valued. If you think of somebody like Jonathan Franzen and *The Corrections*, or if you think of William Trevor or John Banville, they write that kind of thing and it's where literature's at, this basic birth, life, death, what we all go through thing, but if women do it it's domestic, it's trivial, it's frivolous.'<sup>6</sup> In the same interview she mentions the merit in the creation of a 'prize in Australia for women writers like the Orange Prize', due to this general neglect of women writers (*PI* 16). Since then, this has become a reality in the form of the Stella Prize.

This perception of women's writing as trivial or frivolous remains a troublesome issue for female authors and one which is not easily overcome. Halligan doesn't consider herself a 'woman's writer. I think I'm writing about people for people'; but acknowledges that 'sometimes male reviewers just sort of ignore them [her books] because they think disparagingly, "oh, women's books"' (*PI* 15). She is unapologetic about her subject matter:

No wonder I write domestic novels; my life has been centred in domesticity. But I don't write about mis-plumbed washing machines, I write about birth and death, and love and marriage, or not, about betrayals and jealousy. About life that is a walk with love and death ... The same subjects as the Greeks, and Shakespeare. The things that matter. My characters aren't kings and queens, aren't noble and grand, but their passions are as real.<sup>7</sup>

This is an issue Woolf discusses nearly a century ago in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) where she considers 'the effect of sex upon the novelist' (71). For Woolf:

It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (74)

More recently, Garry Kinnane, in his 1998 article, 'Shopping at Last!', decries Australian creative writers' inability 'to come to terms with that vast suburban middle-world that our

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Jones, 'Bottling the Forbidden Fruit,' *Australian Literary Studies* 23.3 (2008): 318 – 327.

<sup>6</sup> Robyn Greaves, 'An Interview with Marion Halligan' (15 June 2011), *Writers in Conversation* Vol. 1, no. 1, (February 2014) 14.

<sup>7</sup> In Carmel Bird, ed., *Home Truth* (Sydney: Fourth Estate, 2010) 133.

culture-spinners have loved to hate, though it happens to be the physical and cultural space in which the vast majority of Australians do their living.’<sup>8</sup> Kinnane recognises what Halligan and Woolf have long known and written about:

there is as much suffering and happiness, as much crime and passion, as much art and industry going on in the suburbs as anywhere else, except that it is often beneath the surface or behind the deceptive facade of tranquil streets and respectable houses. (45)

Halligan recognises the unease that exists ‘beneath the surface or behind the deceptive facade’ of our lives, the darkness that shadows us, and she explores this in her fiction. It does not take long for a discerning reader to recognise the deeper considerations in her writing.

Woolf was also aware of the unease that shadows our lives. Her works have similar considerations to those of Halligan; exploring themes such as human nature, beauty, life, and death. Woolf describes feeling sudden violent shocks throughout her life, moments of exquisite pain or great beauty, which she refers to as ‘moments of being’, and which she tries to capture in writing. She uses words and writing to help explain to herself the impact of what she experiences. By committing the experience to writing, Woolf felt that she ‘was not powerless. I was conscious – if only at a distance – that I should in time explain it’ (*MB* 72) and she felt that her perception in this regard was what made her a writer. Woolf’s characters also experience these revelatory moments. Clarissa (the Mrs Dalloway of *Mrs Dalloway*), sees ‘an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment.’<sup>9</sup> These moments of illumination flicker brightly – a sudden, brilliant flash of light – and then they are gone, leaving a lasting impression on the receiver. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe considers: ‘The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.’<sup>10</sup> For Lily, “‘you” and “I” and “she” pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint’ (*TTL* 133). Similarly, for Halligan, ‘the world is a cruel and dark and difficult place and it is words that light the small candle flames to keep the dark at bay.’<sup>11</sup> Her character, Claire, in *The Fog Garden*, finds words which she hopes ‘will be shapely, memorable, poignant words for grief, death and disaster. Turning terror into a poetry of beauty and dignity.’<sup>12</sup> For Woolf and Halligan there is beauty in the midst of pain and they capture this in writing.

Halligan and Woolf both had personal experience of death in their lives and writing helped make sense of the experience. In *Moments of Being* Woolf writes: ‘I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole.’ She goes on to say, ‘I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else. All artists I suppose feel something like this’ (*MB* 72-73). Halligan describes feeling the same way in an article entitled, ‘Why I Write’: ‘I write in order to put the world into words. I’ve always done that in my head. I can’t perceive anything without trying to find words for it.’<sup>13</sup> Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing technique allows readers intimate access to the workings of her

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<sup>8</sup> Garry Kinnane, ‘Shopping at last! History, fiction and the anti-suburban tradition,’ *Australian Literary Studies* 18.4 (October 1998): 41 – 56.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1925]) 27.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2002 [1927]) 120.

<sup>11</sup> Marion Halligan, ‘Memoir: Small Candle Flames,’ *Griffith Review* 10 (Summer 2005-2006): 155 – 160.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Halligan, *The Fog Garden*, (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 160.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Why I Write,’ *Kunapipi* 16.1 (1994): 58 – 59.

characters minds and the exploration of her themes. Halligan's exploration of the value of art for her characters achieves a similar effect.

Three of Halligan's novels spanning a ten-year period feature an artist figure for whom art is like the small candle flame. It provides a light that flickers briefly in the darkness, a 'luminous moment' (TM 216) which allays the sense of unease that shadows us due to the changeability and impermanence of life. This illumination is fragile, momentary; it waxes and wanes like the candle flames, causing the artists to return to their art again and again in an act of perpetual searching. In *Lovers' Knots* (1992) the photographer, Mikelis, uses his art to try and make sense of the world.<sup>14</sup> The photograph is a prompt for memory and a catalyst for story-telling in the novel. Lives are measured in terms of birth, marriage and death in a family chronicle that initially sprang from Halligan's own life. In *The Golden Dress* (1998) painter Ray Pellerin is besieged by death from an early age and this shadows the rest of his life.<sup>15</sup> Death robs him of his childhood; he is damaged as a result and uses his art to try and stay grounded in the world. Death shapes Ray's art and also paralyses it as he struggles to reconcile his grief. *The Fog Garden* (2001) is an intensely personal novel which Halligan wrote following the death of her own husband. The novel's main protagonist is a writer, Clare, who is also coming to terms with the death of her husband. In *The Fog Garden* death is not a past event but a present experience that the writer character grapples with, writing about it as she tries to negotiate her way through it. In these novels Halligan seems to suggest that the value of art is to provide expression which can lead to illumination and a sense of understanding, but which is only ever momentary. It is sufficient, however, to keep the underlying darkness at bay and allows us to find a way to 'put the severed parts together' and live in the face of experiences such as loss, grief and bereavement.

*Lovers' Knots* is a novel spanning 100 years, weaving its way through an intricate web of stories stemming from the Gray family who migrated to Australia from England. The idea for the novel originated from memories of Halligan's own childhood in Newcastle: 'It began with "The Tin Mission", which was originally a novella, or rather, a long short story. That was my parents' courtship as I knew it'.<sup>16</sup> The novel is structured as a set of short stories which Halligan initially wrote separately and in no particular order:

When I was writing it, every time I typed up a chapter (because I wrote it by hand), I'd have to give it a title. I couldn't give it a number because I didn't know what order it was going to be in. I had this big piece of cardboard on a table and I had the names of the chapters on little bits of card, and I'd rearrange them every now and then and I'd think, 'now what about this order?' I'd look up the manuscript and see where that bit finished, and quite often there'd be a sort of serendipitous connection because I wanted that image of the box of snapshots that just spreads out. We can understand people's lives from that.<sup>17</sup> (8)

The stories in the novel spread out from the family in 'The Tin Mission' as *Lovers' Knots* traces a vast array of characters in an intricate web or tapestry of lives. 'We sit in our lives like spiders,' the narrator interjects at one point, and 'believe that the web about us is of our own

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<sup>14</sup> Marion Halligan, *Lovers' Knots* (Port Melbourne: Minerva, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Marion Halligan, *The Golden Dress* (Ringwood: Viking Australia Ltd, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Greaves, Interview 7.

<sup>17</sup> Greaves, Interview 7.

spinning, but this is an illusion. It may appear to depend on that object, or this event; in fact the ravellings travel much further back – and will forward – than we are likely to observe’ (*LK* 149). The idea of searching for hidden patterns in our lives, or the question of whether those patterns even exist – when maybe ‘everything that happens to us [is] the most absurd accident of chance’ – is one Halligan considers throughout *Lovers’ Knots* (199). The characters experience many changes, triumphs and disappointments across generations as Halligan explores the nature of life and humanity through them. The image of the spider’s web is also used by Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*, where she describes a ‘spider’s thread of attachment’ linking characters (*MD* 97). Like Halligan, Woolf wants to believe that behind everything ‘is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this’ (*MB* 72). Connections between characters, between past and present, are explored in both Halligan’s and Woolf’s novels.

The artist figure in *Lovers’ Knots* is photographer, Mikelis. Mikelis migrated to Australia from Latvia with his mother when he was a child. It was because of a word in a book of pictures of his birthplace that Mikelis came to his life’s obsession and occupation, photography. The word was ‘silver’ and described the light of Latvia: ‘the lands of the Baltic are bathed in silvery light’, Mikelis’ mother told him (*LK* 126). Light and colour remain of particular interest to Mikelis and to Halligan in her writing. Mikelis quickly developed a ‘compulsion to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing’ through this art form.<sup>18</sup> Photographs function for Mikelis in the way that Woolf describes the novel as an art form: each provide ‘a structure leaving a shape on the mind’s eye’ in order to understand what one sees and feels (*ROO* 71). In Halligan’s novels, grief shakes the foundation of the characters’ lives and they use their art to provide a shape or structure through which to try and explain the emotion generated.

Mikelis becomes dependent on photography as his primary mode of perception: his ‘camera was his eye ... and did its own seeing’ (*LK* 45). He continually photographs his wife, Veronica, over the course of their lives together; immortalising her on film as testament to his ongoing desire for her. Their relationship is one of passion based around desire. It survives the death of a child and adultery on both sides in a mutual, spiralling, ongoing desire that is also composed of loss and lack. Mikelis photographs his ‘idol’ attempting to take possession of her through his art, to ‘know’ her, but never quite managing to do so (234). He takes pictures of her ‘that please him; not satisfy, but please’ yet is ‘little interested in conversation with Veronica’ preferring to try and explain her to himself through his art (259). Or is it more a case of explaining *himself* and *his* feelings through his photographs of her? Veronica dies unexpectedly at fifty-four, alone in her chair. Mikelis finds her and one of his first actions is to photograph her, later recalling:

The weight of such a moment saves you from it, it’s too large, too heavy; you can only slide around the edge of it. I went and got my camera ... Not until I’d photographed her death could I see it, my eye needed the photos, to know what it saw ... They’re a record not just of that event, but of my presence at it. What I was capturing was my loss. (246)

Mikelis needs the lens of his camera to process his loss. He uses his art in an attempt to see and ‘know’ the darkness he feels inside himself by distancing himself from it through the camera, attempting to preserve what he has lost and find a way to continue living in the face of death.

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<sup>18</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979) 24.

At the end of *Lovers' Knots*, life is likened to the reverse side of a tapestry: 'the back, the knots and tangles and rough ends' – all we can do is 'work out [its] pattern as best we can' (*LK* 376). By structuring the novel with many story threads looping back over each other and linking together a panoply of lives over many generations, all circulating around the motif of the photograph, Halligan raises the question of how we shall live: connecting us to the stories as we recognise a 'community of experience ... all the lives shuffled in together, all the generations, all different and all the same' (44). Art connects us in this 'community of experience.' The photographs in *Lovers' Knots* function as *memento mori*: static and poignant reminders of past times, people and places. They are a vehicle for memory and story-telling, measuring the lives of families, and a way of seeing, preserving and understanding experiences such as grief, loss and bereavement.

While the photograph and the art of photography explored in *Lovers' Knots* are part of a narrative about the cyclical nature of life and death, *The Golden Dress* (also partly set in the working class suburb of Newcastle where Halligan grew up) contains a principle protagonist whose life has been irrevocably shaped by death. Death shadows artist Ray Pellerin, who paints 'his own stories ... looking not outward, but in' (*GD* 180). Throughout the novel Ray tries to make sense of his life and his place in the world in an ongoing 'conversation with himself' through his art (237). The novel's epigraph is from Auden's poem 'Death's Echo': 'The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews/Not to be born is the best for man/The second best is a formal order/The dance's pattern, dance while you can.'<sup>19</sup> 'Death's enticing echo mocks' (1.40) Ray throughout his life and he finds expression for his experience of it through his art.

Ray was brought up by his mother, Molly, and grandmother, Ivy. From its beginning, Ray's life is about loss and absence. He is told his father died in a mining accident, causing Molly's return to Newcastle to live with her mother and take up a job in the laundry where she began her working life. We find out later in the novel that Ray was the result of an unplanned pregnancy and he is given the false version of his beginnings to cover up sexual shame. Ray feels a sense of unease relating to the stories he has been told about his early life and his inability to recall them from within his own memory. As a result of this vague and blurred beginning, Ray thinks of childhood as a 'formless world ... where you had to hang on to the idea of your own space' (*GD* 5). It is only as an adult that Ray finds a way to give his childhood 'form' through art as he 'paints his own life': versions of a past which alters as he tries to fix it in memories he cannot entirely rely upon (237). He uses painting in a similar way to Lily Briscoe, the artist figure in *To the Lighthouse*, who 'dipped into' her memories to 'refashion' them and felt that they then 'stayed in the mind almost like a work of art' (*TTL* 120). Art provides a structure for Ray to process his memories.

Ray's mother is a tragic figure in the novel. As a girl she is vibrant and full of hope. She has a love of life which expresses itself through her body, particularly in dancing. At the age of fifteen, she 'jigs her feet and her skimpy skirt flutters' as she believes 'the world will be good to her' (*GD* 68). Her life turns out to be a series of disappointments, from her first experience of sex at a party on the beach, to having to return to Newcastle with baby Ray, born out of wedlock. She continues to dream, however, and to find pleasure in clothes, dancing and dating until she falls in love again, this time with a married man. Believing his story of a dying wife and the promise of a life together, she and Ivy make the golden dress of the novel's title from a 'remnant' of material, a piece of 'pretty fancy rag', to wear to a dance which her lover will

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<sup>19</sup> W. H. Auden, *The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 206, 11.57-60.

attend. The dress is a 'dark, golden yellow colour of honey, a heavy linen fabric with crusty embroidery in some sort of silky thread which the light caught and made to gleam like gold' (130). Molly's hopes for the future are dashed at the highly anticipated dance as her lover's supposedly dying wife is there with him, appearing to be in good health. After discovering she is pregnant to her married lover Molly does not return from her usual morning swim and her body is found 'washed up on the beach at Stockton' five days later (140). The photographs of Molly dancing are among the few artefacts from Ray's childhood and later he paints different versions of her, in a working out of grief and loss, 'transforming Molly into a shining, hieratic figure' in the paintings.<sup>20</sup>

The tragic death of his best friend, Step, by shark attack at a surf carnival alters Ray's life yet again. He tries to wrest Step from the mouth of the shark but cannot save him. Ray internalises the deaths of his mother and best friend, becoming melancholic. He turns to painting as a working out of his grief and loss. Like Lily Briscoe, he 'could not see ... without a brush in [his] hand' (*TTL* 39). As an adult, Ray paints Molly and Step's deaths 'in various forms and versions' in an attempt to find some sort of peace or understanding (*GD* 170). Ray's girlfriend, Martine, recognises the underlying grief in Ray's paintings, which she considers 'turns into the grief in all human life' (173). As she gazes at Ray's painting she thinks

It's as though painting is what's caught Ray, as if it's what holds him safe, as though all of his youth before that was a falling and only when that reached out and grabbed him was he safe. He's seen a lot of death, untimely death ... Painting saves him from all that. (240)

The shadow of death lingers over Ray, manifesting in a form of melancholia when he is alone in a studio in Paris. In this space of isolation, Ray's attention turns to the *clochard*, a local homeless person who fascinates him, just as Halligan herself was fascinated by a similar figure during her time in Paris: 'he was just there; and he was clearly a narrative that you didn't know' (*PI* 8). Ray begins to draw the *clochard*, then invites him into the studio apartment and prepares sumptuous, elaborate meals for him which he sketches in fine detail so that they become 'part of a precise linear world' (*GD* 26). Ray becomes so absorbed in these drawings he loses the desire for anything else. Ray's world becomes more and more surreal as he becomes increasingly detached from it. The fine black and white sketches end up 'piled on the floor in sprawling messy heaps. The pale dust that powdered the *clochard*'s clothes sifted into the studio and lay thick in fine particles over everything' (26). None of this seems to register with Ray. The fine, detailed sketches are like the expression of an increasing melancholia as his obsession turns inward. Ray's sense of detachment leads him to walk out onto the street one day and enter the nether world of the *clochard*, 'knowing that the cage no longer holds him ... his indifference wells calmly and comfortably within him' (27). He fades into an aimless, drifting existence. Death has left an indelible mark on Ray. He is damaged by it in a similar way to Septimus after his experience of the war in *Mrs Dalloway*. The effects of too much death cause Septimus to suicide. His death reverberates with other characters in the novel. It causes Clarissa to muse: 'Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone' (*MD* 156).

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<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Jones, 'Journeys and Pilgrimages: Marion Halligan's Fiction,' *Antipodes* 24.1 (June 2010): 19 – 23.

This is similar to the experience of Ray in *The Golden Dress* – he is alone in his contemplation of death.

By the end of the novel Ray returns to reality, thanks to Martine, but the effects of death have left a luminosity about him, a translucence and fragility that is irrevocable. He is haunted by loss and absence in such a way that he appears destined to remain bewildered, disengaged and damaged. Ray paints images of his loss in an act of mourning which he does not seem entirely able to work through. Art helps him to transfer the images from his mind into a tangible, knowable form, but his pain is not assuaged and so he returns to art again and again. He needs more than art to maintain a connection with the world. He needs another human being. Halligan felt ‘that it was necessary for Ray to be brought back; I don’t think he really wanted to in the beginning. He is a very melancholy person, and a very damaged person.’<sup>21</sup> Art is an anchor for him and necessary to him, but it is not the only thing he needs to stay connected to life.

*The Fog Garden* (2001) is a further examination of these themes but on a more intimate level. The novel features a recently widowed writer who explores the experience of grief through writing. After her husband’s death from cancer Clare notices that ‘her life has begun throwing up stories, they fall around her like pages of a book, and when she picks them up they find their own order’ (FG 238). She writes these ‘shapely intricate narratives’ and takes the reader through the process of finding words and understanding in the midst of grief (134). There has been some debate over whether *The Fog Garden* falls into the category of novel or memoir, yet Halligan insists it is a fiction and has reiterated this on a number of occasions, including in the introduction to the book itself. She is interested in the nature of truth and writing, and feels that fiction allows a writer to be more frank than autobiographical writing or memoir. In *The Taste of Memory* published three years after *The Fog Garden*, Halligan writes that *The Fog Garden* ‘is a novel, it owes a lot to the events of my life but it is still a work of fiction. I needed fiction to be frank in a way I could never have been in a memoir’ (TM 10). Dorothy Jones, in an article comparing Halligan’s memoir and *The Fog Garden*, writes: ‘the overlap in the lives of author and character is in some respects [*The Fog Garden*’s] essence.’<sup>22</sup> From a place of deep grief and personal loss comes a novel of intimacy: a profound emotional journey following a life-changing event.

From the beginning *The Fog Garden* has an unusual and intriguing structure. The first paragraph begins with a specific place, ‘Lower Snug, Tasmania’, and a date, ‘11.12.98’; as well as a dedication, ‘For Graham, who died, 18.11.98’, situating the novel in reality. The repetition of the short emotionally charged opening sentence – ‘I do not crack. I do not crack’ – sets the tone for the chapter. There is an intimate moment when the narrator notices how a ‘man nestles his hand in the hollow of his wife’s neck’ and she reflects on ‘the immensity of [her] loss.’ She is struggling under the weight of a grief which she eloquently describes as an ‘edifice ... a great cathedral’: ‘My grief is a great cathedral and the hand nestling in the neck is a small bird perched on the corbel of one of its arches’ (FG 1-2). Early on, the writer has created an imagined structure for her grief, a monument: a concrete edifice in her mind’s eye that helps her not feel so ‘powerless’ in the face of overwhelming emotions that threaten to swallow her. *The Fog Garden* epitomises Woolf’s thoughts on the shape that novels assume out of the ‘kind of emotion that is appropriate to it’ – in this case a cathedral of grief (ROO 72).

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<sup>21</sup> Greaves, Interview 8.

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Jones, ‘Writing Food, Writing Fiction, Writing Life: Marion Halligan’s Memoirs,’ *The Unsocial Sociability of Women’s Life Writing*, eds. Anne Collett and Louise D’Arcens (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2010) 176.



Following this first chapter is an introduction, and it is here that Halligan states quite clearly that the novel's protagonist, Clare, 'isn't me. She's like me ... Both of us have had to come to terms with being widowed, and sometimes we have made similar choices. Not always. Her voice is quite like mine ... But she isn't me. She is a character in fiction' (FG 9). It is difficult not to blur the distinction, particularly when other novels that Halligan has written, such as *Lovers' Knots* and *The Golden Dress*, as well as a short story, 'Vermillion',<sup>23</sup> are attributed to Clare in *The Fog Garden*. From this unusual start to the novel we enter Clare's story, and as a result it is impossible for the reader to know which of Clare's experiences are also those of Halligan's. The first chapter and introduction serve to create the personal tone of the rest of the novel; one which seems even more authentic as we are aware the author has an intimate knowledge of the grief and associated desires experienced by her protagonist. The fugue of 'ambiguous, paradoxical [and] counter-existing' emotions that make up the cathedral of grief sets the narrator on a bittersweet journey of self-preservation and self-reclamation (239).

Clare's grieving involves a sexual affair with a married man. Clare and her lover talk, read to each other, listen to music, and eat meals together. The lovers discuss the nature of their relationship even as they are participating in it. Their talk ranges over many topics: love, the nature of adultery, marriage, and, of course, art. In this way Halligan explores her themes through her middle-class, middle-aged characters. The affair has been described as presented in a 'very literary context' ('WF' 179). The lovers listen to a recording of Dante's *Inferno* and discuss the story of Tristan and Iseult. Clare writes about their relationship and reads the stories back to her lover. She

transcribes the stories that her life offers as she turns its pages ... She will not publish these stories, her grief and the expression it's found in making love will remain as secret as the adultery. Which means that she gave them to her lover to read. They delighted him. It was like making love twice, once in the flesh, again as these other people. (FG 235)

It is when the lover's wife discovers the affair and it has ended that Clare decides she will indeed publish the stories. Like Halligan, Clare's stories

fall into her pen. They loop and spiral their frail elaborate structures around the central enormous fact of [Geoffrey's] death. To begin with she thought most of them were unpublishable. They pleased her because they showed her she wrote to understand, not to publish ...

But time passed, things change, all writers are tarts in the end, she knows now she will let them go, send them out, after all. She has gained enough self-knowledge in the past months to know that for her to write and to publish have become synonymous; that is why she does it. To understand, yes, but showing other people what she has understood is an integral part of it. The logical and only end of the process. (FG 134)

This is similar to the sentiments of Mikelis in *Lovers' Knots*: 'We're all tarts and prostitutes, whores and sluts and their pimps too, blithely selling love to art' (LK 128). Just as Martine in *The Golden Dress* thought that 'maybe all story telling is betrayal' (GD 262), Clare 'knows that

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<sup>23</sup> Marion Halligan, 'Vermillion,' *Southerly* (Spring-Summer 1999): 297 – 308.

all writing is betrayal, or rather that you have to choose which betrayal it will be, your friends or your art' (FG 167). In *Lovers' Knots* Mikelis felt he could 'only slide around the edge' of his grief; likewise in *The Fog Garden*, Clare's writing slides 'around the central enormous fact' of Geoffrey's death (134). By making their art public artists risk betraying themselves or others through the many possible interpretations to which their art lends itself.

As well as discussing the nature of art and fiction with her married lover, Clare conducts an email exchange with a man with whom she had a sexual relationship prior to her marriage. Again, there is comfort, or therapy, in writing. Clare finds that 'writing to him makes her consider what her life is about' (FG 254). In one email she considers

Fiction ... is about illuminating the world we live in ... That's why we read ... to make sense of this difficult world ... What's more it's about consolation, she says. Like all art, it fills us with desire, which it doesn't quite assuage, but itself is some comfort. (63)

Throughout *The Fog Garden*, Clare continually turns to writing and words to anchor her and give sense to what she is feeling and experiencing: 'there are words that the mind gathers and lays like balm on the heart, believing that they will heal, but still the heart aches. Surely a little less? Maybe for a moment' (231).

The choice of a cathedral as the structure through which to explain her grief suggests the immensity of Clare's sense of bereavement and the many aspects to it. 'The cathedral is a place of immense stony contemplative calm' in which Clare (and Halligan) can imagine they feel safe (FG 150). The fog garden is also an actual sculpture in the novel, part of a 'sculpture garden' in which there is a restaurant. It is a favourite of Clare's which she shows her lover after his wife has found out about the affair and it is ending. They watch 'the white vapour eddy and billow and rise in rags of mist' about them until it settles on Clare's hair, where it seems to lay 'a greyish veil' (78 – 79). Her grief shrouds her, covering every aspect of her life, and urges her to find words to express it. For Clare, 'If you've got the right words in the right places, then you can feel you've got your life in order, too. For a while' (121).

As well as exploring her fog garden of grief through sex, friendship, food and writing, Clare embarks on a physical journey overseas. The ultimate result of this journey is also unexpected when she falls ill in Paris and comes face to face with the full force of her grief, unable to run away from it or skirt around it any longer. She decides to embrace it and through the experience is finally able to return home and take up life again. Through the whirling mass of unexpected emotions her experience of grief and loss generated, Clare writes her way to a new understanding of life and her place in it. At the end of *The Fog Garden* it appears she has found a way to reconnect with an altered life. She is again able to find happiness in small pleasures, such as a pair of curtains, or a newly flowering rose. She identifies with Woolf's Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*: 'Clare could identify with Mrs Ramsay, a woman who sits and thinks the world she lives into meaning ... Mrs Ramsay ... knows that it is the work of her body and mind to draw ecstasy out of the simple glorious things around her' (FG 148). By processing her grief through writing, Clare negotiates a new way of understanding and living.

*Lovers' Knots*, *The Golden Dress* and *The Fog Garden* are rich explorations of the value of art both for artists and recipients of the art, particularly in the face of profound emotional experiences. Halligan understands that art does not have (nor *should* provide) all the answers; it does not solve the mysteries of life, but helps us step back from them and question our lives, in the way that she sees the achievement of fellow Australian author, David Malouf: 'He traces the little threads of circumstances, of choices and failures, that finally form the cloth of our lives,

and which we mostly do not understand because we are too close to it to see the whole; only later can the patterns be discerned if we care to look.<sup>24</sup> The evocative stories woven into each work of fiction contain many layers and the reader is able to enjoy the puzzles of human nature explored in the novels.

Halligan finds ‘luminous moments’ in everyday life, similar to Woolf’s ‘moments of being.’ These moments can be captured in art and preserved forever. For Halligan putting these moments into writing ‘is one of the pleasures of literature; it gives our imaginations a shake and a shove, it changes us, for a moment or forever.’<sup>25</sup> Halligan is adept at capturing the fragility of life in her art, its undercurrent of unease, which is part and parcel of what she sees as the imperfect ‘sublunary world’ (*TM* 164). She sees art as a way of expressing and exploring these undercurrents and their associated desires; what it is that makes us human and causes us to behave as we do. In *The Fog Garden*, Clare makes the comment that ‘art does not see us ... But we see it, and can know that it has seen, if not us, our condition. The likes of us. That’s something. Maybe enough’ (*FG* 148). Readers can see themselves in Halligan’s fiction in all their individuality, strength and frailty. We need art and artists to embrace the difficult emotions, to find expression for them in their art, time and again; to provide nourishment for our hearts and help us live in the face of life’s dark places as well as celebrating its light.

From her position discussing women and fiction in 1929 it was Woolf’s hope for the future that ‘we shall find [the woman writer] knocking [the novel] into shape for herself when she has free use of her limbs’ (*ROO* 77). Woolf exhorted women to write with integrity, without compromise due to issues of sex, and without apology: ‘If we have the habit of freedom’ she writes, ‘and the courage to write exactly what we think’ then we can free other women to write (112). Halligan has made the novel her own; she writes from what she knows with insight and eloquence. Yet the battle to be recognised as a female novelist persists. Perhaps we have come a long way since 1929, yet there is still work to be done. Women persist in their struggle to be valued as writers regardless of sex, following Woolf’s closing advice: ‘that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while’ (112). Woolf made a remarkable contribution to writing and to ways of thinking about women and fiction. She has been extensively analysed and celebrated since her death. While Halligan is not writing in poverty and (total) obscurity she deserves more critical attention than she has received thus far for her contribution to Australian (and world) literature.

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<sup>24</sup> Marion Halligan, ‘About Books,’ *National Library of Australia News* 1.1 (October 1990): 10.

<sup>25</sup> Marion Halligan, ‘From Barthes to Barmecide: The Tasting of Words,’ *Australian Public Affairs Information Service*, National Library of Australia (1998): 25.