

## ULRIKE STURM

Central Queensland University

### **The Outsider within:**

### **a reflection on notions of alienation within life writing**

#### ABSTRACT

*Authors relating their experiences as outsiders is a recurring theme within the genre of life writing. Focusing on the work of the South Australian author and artist, Barbara Hanrahan (1939-1991), and Ian Abdulla (1947-2011), an Australian indigenous artist from the Riverland region, also in South Australia, this article seeks to explore whether feelings of alienation can occur just as easily in the place where one has grown up, where one supposedly 'belongs'. Both Abdulla and Hanrahan, through their differing approaches to life writing, offer an insight into the complex dynamic between place, belonging and identity.*

#### KEYWORDS

life writing  
visual narratives  
Australian artists  
South Australia

#### INTRODUCTION

The experience of the outsider is a recurring theme within the genre of life writing. The focus of this article, however, is on life writing where these experiences of alienation occur in the place where one has grown up, and where one supposedly 'belongs'. For South Australian artists Barbara Hanrahan (1939-1991) and Ian Abdulla (1947-2011), writing was a significant aspect of their work. Hanrahan was an acclaimed artist and simultaneously had a successful career as an author, with 15 novels published during her lifetime. Abdulla was an indigenous Ngarrindjeri man who always included a narrative text element, often several sentences long, at the centre of the top of his paintings, which related childhood memories of growing up in

the Riverland region by the Murray River in South Australia. These brief narratives explained what was depicted in the painting.

While Hanrahan and Abdulla were born in close geographical proximity to one another, they were nevertheless born into very different circumstances. Through their differing approaches to life writing, they each enable the viewer or reader to gain an insight into the complex dynamic between place, belonging and identity.

After the death of her father when she was an infant, Hanrahan grew up in an all-female household with her mother, her grandmother and her disabled great-aunt in a working class inner-city suburb of Adelaide. It is evident from the Hanrahan's diary writing as well as her novels, with their intriguing blend of truth and fiction, that she identified as somewhat 'apart' from her peers from a young age.

Abdulla's childhood home was near the banks of the Murray in the Riverland region of South Australia. His family was displaced from this home when it was swept away by heavy flooding in 1956, and they relocated to the fringes of the nearby small towns of Winkie and Cobdogla. Later, Abdulla moved to the Gerard Mission where a farm offered employment for young men. He did not begin painting until 1988 and continued to live in the Riverland region.

While it might seem unusual to focus on the work of two artists to explore the theme of life writing, I believe their work poignantly illustrates this sense of being an outsider within. It also resonates strongly with me as an artist for whom autobiographical writing is an important part of my work.

For many Australians, their childhood home is distant from where they live as adults. Data from the 2011 Australian census tells us that 24.6 per cent of Australians were born overseas and 43.1 per cent of Australians have at least one parent who was born overseas (ABS, 2011). When considering this startling statistic in relation to the genre of life writing in Australia, we can imagine that the theme of outsider, in one sense or another, will have a significant place. Alienation can of course take many forms. It may refer to issues of sexuality, poverty, disability, race, political views, religion, the migrant experience, and many other experiences besides.

Yet the experience of feeling like an outsider can just as readily occur in the suburbs or in one's home town. Abdulla and Hanrahan both experienced degrees of alienation or a sense of being an outsider in the environment where they had grown up: in the place where they supposedly 'belonged'.

## **LIFE WRITING**

Narratives within the life writing genre are stories constructed from memories. Of course, authors writing within the genre might research their history and use reference materials such as photos and other archives, but at the core are memories and recollections. Likewise, for each one of us, our identity is developed from layer upon layer of memories, many of which will have a strong connection with 'place'. Memories of our own childhood are often coloured by our recollections of our family home during those early years.

Cherry Gilchrist, creative writing teacher at the University of Oxford, suggests it is a generously inclusive term, which has:

[...] helped to generate fascinating new ways of writing up memoir and personal experience. Such books may be based on factual material, (the stuff of non-fiction) but which have this thread of personal experience, and stories of real people, at their core (Gilchrist 2013).

A contrasting view is taken by author Julija Sukys who interprets the term in a fairly literal sense.

The term “life-writing” designates private texts not written for publication, primarily letters and diaries. It can tell us a lot about the past, how people lived, what they thought, how they organized their time. It can also tell us about the internal lives of people who have traditionally gone unnoticed, especially women. And although we might read much life-writing for content, many of us are interested in life-writing not only as historical artefact, but as literature.

But for all its richness, life-writing poses challenges. Unlike a formal biography or autobiography, it tends to have little structure other than chronology, its boring parts aren't edited out, and obscure references go unexplained. Life-writing records life as it happens. It's raw and real (Sukys 2011).

The New South Wales Higher School Certificate online syllabus for Year 12 students studying the English Extension elective, 'Life Writing' for 2013 offers this definition of the genre.

(T)exts (which) are autobiographical and factual although they contain fictional elements which the composers use to a greater or lesser degree to develop their ideas. The texts include a variety of references to religious and literary texts, art, music, allegory and fable. Historical references place characters and concerns of the texts within a context (Charles Sturt University 2013).

Thus, definitions for life writing span the range from private writings not for publication, such as diaries and the like, to books which are based on factual material and have a thread of personal experience but may nevertheless contain fictional elements.

The relevance of exploring this definition relates to the fact that this article will in a sense extend the definition further still as text elements were frequent and important elements in the artwork of both Hanrahan and Abdulla.

### **BARBARA HANRAHAN**

Adelaide was a very structured society when Hanrahan was growing up, and Thebarton, the working class inner-city suburb where her family lived, was decidedly looked down upon by the Adelaide society of the 1940s. As she grew up, Hanrahan felt increasingly stifled by these social strictures and wanted to escape them.

She felt comfortable in the family's unusual three-generation female household with her mother, her grandmother and her great-aunt. Her father had died when Hanrahan was one year old. But from a young age, she felt that she was an 'observer', both beyond the house and within it. She intuitively understood the workings, the confines and the suffocation of Adelaide society. She was able to make observations about this society through her artworks, but to write about her experiences and her observations, she needed to take a step away from it.

Hanrahan took this step away by travelling to England in 1962, when she was in her early 20s. She later said of her decision to travel to England that it was because Adelaide at that time was ghastly and she felt it was the sort of place that 'put you in your box, or made your pattern for you' (Hanrahan 1984).

Her first stay in London was for about two years and she returned to Adelaide when her money ran out. Yet she went back to London a couple of years later with her partner, Jo Steele and they then stayed there for about another 13 years. In fact, it

was during this time in England that she began her second career. She purchased a typewriter in 1971, and this was the beginning of her career as an acclaimed author of highly imaginative autobiographical fiction.

Many of Hanrahan's fifteen novels had a strong autobiographical element and the boundaries between reality and fiction frequently merge in her novels. This blending of truth and fiction is confounding in that the real names of characters are frequently used and some recollections are embarrassingly cruel and, in terms of present day sensitivities regarding political correctness, often quite embarrassing in their use of discriminatory taunts, particularly in her descriptions of her great-aunt who had Downs Syndrome. The following passage from *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (Hanrahan, 1973), is uncomfortable to read today:

Reece is my great-aunt; yet at ten I am taller than she at thirty-five. She is my grandmother's sister; yet she cannot read or write or count. She is a grown-up; yet she wears children's clothing. She has frog-like eyes with half-moon lids, sad eyebrows arched in permanent surprise, a domed forehead with wrinkles, a snout, a mouth that shows her tongue - becomes an idiot-grin when she is happy. People stare at her in the street - she is real, and reality is too strong for their slumbering, narcotized lives. She is a mongol (Hanrahan 1973: 20).

Hanrahan clearly loved her great aunt and as very close to her, as she also was to her mother and grandmother. But she didn't shy away from describing things exactly as they appear to her, and social niceties didn't influence her expression.

There is a sense in which Hanrahan's novels are in parallel with her artistic body of work. Her prints have a strong narrative content and frequently incorporate elements of text, which is often an almost decorative element. Both her novels and prints explore similar themes: her family, her grandmother's garden, her work as an artist, as well as commentary on contemporary society and sexual politics.

The visual language Hanrahan employed is often quite stark and confronting. For example, *Wedding Night* (Hanrahan 1977) depicts two semi-naked figures with their genitals exposed, lying beside one another on a bed. There is no physical contact between them. The caption 'wedding night' is decoratively carved across the top of the image and bold letters across the woman's belly announce: 'virgin'. Beneath their feet, the figures are labeled 'husband' and 'wife'. This graphic illustration of a newly

married couple, in an uncomfortably childlike style, seems to emphasize the social and psychological subtext of the captions.

Hanrahan was a printmaker before she became an author, and a noticeable contrast between her dual careers seems to be that, as an artist, she always felt a freedom to explore a wide range of subject matter. Yet with her writing, she needed to be away from the place of her childhood, the place located her as an outsider, before she was able to write about it.

### **IAN ABDULLA**

The Riverland section of the Murray River where Ian Abdulla grew up in South Australia was just over a little more than 200 kilometres away from where Hanrahan lived her childhood. Yet his experience as an outsider was woven from quite different complexities. His connections with his family and with other Ngarrindjeri people in the area were strong and positive, yet he always had the sense of the loss that the encroachment of agriculture meant for his traditional culture.

His family's homeland was gradually and increasingly encroached on by farmers and he observed his family's semi-traditional lifestyle being changed by increasing agricultural development by non-indigenous settlers in the area, as well as by the influence of the local mission station. In 1956, very heavy flooding of the Murray River destroyed Abdulla's family's home and they were forced to relocate to the Gerard Mission, although as Jeremy Eccles wrote in Abdulla's obituary in the *Aboriginal Art News*, it was not so much the flooding of '[...] Abdulla's beautifully realised backdrop of the Murray River but the irrigators who forced Ngarrindjeri families off their riparian lands.' (Eccles 2011)

This relocation to Gerard Mission was still in the Riverland region. Having worked variously as a fruit-picker, and as a tractor and bulldozer driver, Abdulla didn't begin to paint until he participated in an art workshop with Stephen Fox when in 1988. His paintings document a different aspect of Aboriginal life to that recorded in the work of Aboriginal artists who use more traditional painting styles which visually document traditional stories. In an interview on ABC TV, Abdulla said, 'When I was 40, I started drawing. And I started drawing about boomerangs and spears and suddenly it hit my mind that this is not where I come from. I come from the river.' on (George Negus Tonight 2003)

Abdulla's work uniquely documented mission life in the mid-twentieth century. His paintings can be described as being in the 'naive' style and it seems that he composed his paintings in a particular way, with a large area of sky in the background, to accommodate his written description or explanation of the scene in the painting. Many of Abdulla's paintings are quite large. For example, *Swimming before school* (Abdulla 1996) measures 240 x 160 cms. The painting recalls his daily journey to school as a child:

Swimming in the river first thing in the morning before going to school which was our way of having a bath in the morning while some of us would put a slice of bread on a stick and then hold the bread over the flames so the bread would just be like a piece of toast. Then we would walk about ten miles to school and back again.

The narrative element of Abdulla's work lent itself readily to reproduction in book form. Two picture books of his work, *As I Grew Older* (Abdulla 1993) and *Tucker* (Abdulla 1994) seem at first to be for younger readers, but I would suggest that Abdulla has in fact employed the very language that has sought to alienate him as a strategy to reclaim the cultural history of the Ngarrindjeri people. He did not learn to speak his indigenous language fluently as a child, as the teachers on the mission forbade it.

Abdulla used his paintings and their stories as a method of sharing his knowledge of the places on the Murray River with the younger Ngarrindjeri. His paintings have almost a map-like quality about them, which reinforces idea of these paintings were intended to educate. This is exemplified by the text in *Swapping Tins of Bully Beef* (Abdulla 1994):

When I was working for the Government we used to go to Coober Pedy and while I was up there the Government paid for all my food, which was white man's food. When the men from Coober Pedy went out hunting they came home with kangaroo which was cooked for a while in the ashes. Kangaroo cooked this way and even goanna, was very tasty. I would swap tins of bully beef for the food they cooked in the ashes. It was much better for eating.

Abdulla had an acute understanding of the impact of the changes around him. The traditions of the Ngarrindjeri were disappearing rapidly and he felt strongly compelled to record this history for future generations.

In his article on the theoretical legacies of the field of cultural studies, Professor Stuart Hall, one of the founding figures of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, proposes that the concept of culture is always linked to displacement. 'There's always something decentred about the medium of culture, about language, textuality, and signification, which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures' (Hall 1991). This argument is at the core of Hall's view that culture is always intrinsically related to some form of power struggle, and that identity is inevitably an ongoing process which is affected by history and culture.

It is apt to relate Hall's argument to Abdulla's work. Although his culture and language were essentially taken away from him by his (non-indigenous) teachers when he was a child, he reclaimed his identity as an adult within his indigenous culture, after having been alienated from it. Through his art, Abdulla shared his knowledge and history with others, and most importantly for him, with indigenous people from the Riverland region.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although Abdulla and Hanrahan's experiences of growing up in South Australia differed vastly, they shared that disquieting experience of feeling that one is on society's margins. They both experienced degrees of alienation or a sense of being an outsider, albeit for quite different reasons, in the environment where they had grown up. While Hanrahan did travel overseas before she started writing, this travel in fact gave her the distance and the space to write about what she had known and experienced during her youth. It was not the travel and being in a different place that was at the root of her experience as an outsider. The perspectives of life which both Hanrahan and Abdulla explored through their work, bring a rich depth to our understanding of the sense of being an outsider. Their written work confirms that feelings of alienation can occur just as easily in the place where one supposedly 'belongs' and this sense is reinforced in their parallel work as visual artists.



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#### **CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Ulrike Sturm is a current PhD candidate at Central Queensland University. Her MFA (2012, University of Sydney) researched contemporary artists working with visual narratives and graphic novels as a way of relating personal experiences of cultural alienation. She has completed BVisArts (1996, University of Sydney), Diploma of Law (1990, LPAB, NSW), BA (1983, University of Sydney). Sturm is also a practicing visual artist, with a focus on artist books, printmedia and visual narratives.

Contact: [u.sturm@cqu.edu.au](mailto:u.sturm@cqu.edu.au)

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