

A Slice Without

REFLECTION STATEMENT



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*"I have no control over which yesterdays I keep and which ones get deleted... I will forget today, but that doesn't mean that today doesn't matter."*¹ – Lisa Genova

Genova's *Still Alice* captures the delicate and moving perspectives developed through the Alzheimer's experience that I explore in my work, *A Slice Without Passionfruit*. It is both her elegant style of writing and my connection with the experiences she conveys that compelled me to represent my concept from the ideas explored in her novel. My Major Work considers the way adversity affects the human condition, examining how the experience of Alzheimer's shapes the perceptions of individuals.

My intention in writing these vignettes was for my audience to gain a greater understanding of the effects of Alzheimer's upon sufferers and their families. I aim for my readers to develop an appreciation of the ripple effect the disease imposes upon an individual's support network by emulating other pieces of contemporary fiction which add a human face to clinical diagnoses. This intention was induced by my reading of Beth Brough's moving recount of the disease in *Alzheimer's With Love*² and the film, *Away from Her*³. These texts offered me a greater knowledge of the disease as a whole and assisted in developing my understanding of the emotional strain of Alzheimer's. For this reason, my target audience is those with experiences of such diseases as Alzheimer's; thereby carers and relatives. Thus, *A Slice Without Passionfruit* was to be published as a contribution to a collection of literary works for the 2015 United Nations' International Year of Compassion. The organisation asked

¹ Genova, L., 2009, *Still Alice*, United States, Pocket Books, U.S

² Brough, B., 1998, *Alzheimer's With Love*, Lismore Southern Cross University Press

³ Capra Releasing Pullin Focus Pictures Lionsgate Film (US) Canada
11/11/06, *Away from Her*, Sarah Polley

for submissions of works that celebrate human challenges. I feel that the nature of my Major Work suits this publication point as it is written in such a way that it will also appeal to the wider community. While I do employ scientific terminology – “‘*Apolipoprotein E gene*’ or ‘*amitriptyline*’ or ‘*acetylcholinesterase*’” – a sense of the human condition is at the forefront of my thinking, and my chief desire is to elicit an empathetic response.

As my story deals with issues that are lifelike within a fictional setting, with a strong element of personal history underpinning my narrative, I have created a hybrid genre of contemporary realism and fictional memoir. I acted to create the verisimilitude evident in novels of contemporary realism, conducting visits to my local nursing home. I spoke to nurses and patients, benefiting from the honest anecdotes they expressed. I also attended a presentation on Alzheimer’s and sourced medical journals to ensure the depiction of the clinical experience was accurate. It was this integrity that I viewed also in Jodi Picoult’s episodic tale *The Pact*⁴, which broadened my understanding of how to write in the genre of contemporary realism and through this, incorporate my empirical research into *A Slice Without Passionfruit*. I was inspired further by the melancholic nature and beautiful representations of life in sections of Genova’s *Still Alice*⁵, as it offered a greater, more empathetic understanding of Alzheimer’s. The depiction of loss of language explored a common aspect of the disease and helped me in my own writing – “*Everything she did and loved, everything she was, required language.*”⁶ A documentary by Louis Theroux *Extreme Love*

⁴ Picoult, J., 1998, *The Pact*, United States, William Morrow and Company Inc, New York

⁵ Genova, L., 2009, *Still Alice*, United States, Pocket Books, U.S.

⁶ Genova, L., 2009, *Stil Alice*, United States, Pocket Books, U.S.

*Dementia*⁷, portrayed the often tragic affection spouse's retain throughout the Alzheimer's experience. It influenced Grace's reflections; *'It was just as magical every time, when he swept behind me, holding my waist and softly kissed my neck. He would whisper, "I love you" onto my skin and it would sink in like a perfume...'*

My knowledge of the memoir genre was developed in my study of *Romulus, My Father*⁸ in the HSC Area of Study, through Gaita's manipulation of the filial memoir. Particularly in my seventh story, I employed the notion of reflection, a feature of the memoir, through Grace's perspective – *"I remember it like yesterday – our bare feet twisting in the soft skeletons of fallen leaves. Sam pulled the ring from his breast pocket."* Another inspirational text was Cassavettes' touching film, *The Notebook*⁹, that follows the lives of two lovers, one of whom experiences Alzheimer's disease.

The short story form was the best way to explore the conflicting perspectives of my characters – my knowledge of the representation of perspectives was extended through my study of Conflicting Perspectives in Module C. It informed my decision to speak in the first person and switch narrators. The first person narration illustrates the different emotions and ideas each character offers, conveying the complexity of the disease. Grace's frustration overruns her descriptions – *'The anger. The childishness. The forgetting. All focused at me; Sam always channels it toward me.'* – whereas Sam's intractable denial is obvious – *'I don't need an excuse. I can still do everything. I'm not really forgetting, merely misplacing thoughts.'* The importance of

⁷ Australia Broadcas Corporation Australia *Loui Theroux* 14/1/13, Louis Theroux: Extrem Lov Dementia Loui Theroux

⁸ Gaita, R., 1998, *Romulus My ather* Melbourne Th Tex Publishin Company

⁹ Ne Lin Cinema Unite States 20/5/04 *The Notebook*, Nick Cassavetes

creating authentic narrative voices was gleaned at the ETA Extension 1 Study Day, which focused on creative writing.

A Slice Without Passionfruit involves three characters – Alexandra Moore (granddaughter), Grace Brodie (carer and wife) and Samuel Brodie (sufferer) – who each hold conflicting roles in the Alzheimer's experience. My choice of different perspectives was influenced by Ness' *Monsters Of Men*¹⁰, the composer successfully manipulates perspectives to create individual voices. Also, my study of *Dracula*¹¹ in the Extension One Preliminary course heightened my awareness of how the specific language choices serve to create distinctive voices of Van Helsing and Jonathan Harker. My initial aim was to write three stories, one from each voice over a time frame of three Christmases (2011-2013), however to adequately convey and do justice to the complex nature of my concept, my work evolved into eight short stories, in the same three year timeframe.

The narrative form also allowed me to create snapshots of events over a span of three years. In reading Coetzee's *Diary Of A Bad Year*¹² and Egan's *A Visit From The Goon Squad*¹³, I developed an understanding of the different ways to represent an alternating narrative. The characters' changing perspectives mirror the progression of the disease itself, developing an understood deterioration between episodes. These episodes let me vary the length of my stories, creating emphasis on specific events and emotions and displaying the effect of the disease. This is a reflection of my study

¹⁰ Ness, P., 2010, *Monster o Men*, London, Walker Book Ltd

¹¹ Stoker, B., 1897, *Dracula*, England, Penguin Classics, England

¹² Coetzee, J. M., 2007, *Diary of a Bad Year*, Melbourne, The Text Publishing Company

¹³ Egan, J., 2010, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, United States, Random House Inc., New York

of *Frankenstein*¹⁴ in Module A of the HSC course, where Shelley's epistolary form convinced me that it was plausible to speak with authority from alternating narrative voices.

After settling upon the short story form, I began research to enhance my knowledge of the craft of writing. Tredinnick's *The Little Red Writing Book*¹⁵ influenced my style of writing, teaching me conventions and structural lessons that lent themselves to my purpose, particularly how to manipulate brevity and spare prose. *10 Short Stories You Must Read in 2011*¹⁶, prompted me to consider different ways to sustain my stories stylistically. While many of my stories are sustained through reflection and introspection, my fourth story is specifically dialogue driven – “*Okay, do you mind if I test your memory?*”

“*Sure, it's still sharp as a thumbtack.*”

Initially I wrote my stories in past tense, however in my reading of *Guantanamo Boy*¹⁷, I was struck by the immediacy engendered by the use of present tense. To develop the understood decline of Sam's mind, I realised this immediacy was imperative to the authenticity of my writing. My stories thus developed so that they were all written in present tense, resonating with the purpose of placing a reader within the challenging life experience.

¹⁴ Shelley, M., 1818, *Frankenstein*, England, Penguin Classics

¹⁵ Tredinnick, M., 2006, *The Little Red Writing Book* Sydney, University of New South Wales Press Ltd.

¹⁶ Behrendt L. Birmingham J. Bradley J. Condon B. Darling M. Kennedy C. Overington, C., Phelan, J., Rudd, J., Wood, C., 2011, *10 Short Stories You Must Read in 2011*, Australia Griffin Press

¹⁷ Perera, A., 2009, *Guantanamo Boy*, United Kingdom, Puffin Books

The title *A Slice Without Passionfruit* is symbolic of Samuel Brodie and is central to the progression of my work. The reference to Sam's aversion to passionfruit also serves as a metaphor for his loss of memory, as established in my first story – "*The passionfruit, that juicy sweetness isn't there. A small but vital ingredient, gone. Just like a lost memory.*" The recurring motif of pavlova forms a narrative bridge between the three voices. It shows the stages of Sam's Alzheimer's and others' changing reactions to it. The employment of this motif was inspired by my study of *Blade Runner*¹⁸ in which Gaff's origami figures are used as a mechanism to cue Deckard's memory. It was this study that also offered insights into my concept. The exploration of the nature of memories developed different perceptions of what memories are and how they affect the individual, in particular how implanted memories affect the Replicants as compared to how false memories affect the Alzheimer's patient.

I appraised my stories by sharing my drafts with family and friends, particularly those within the parameters of my intended audience, as well as experts in the Alzheimer's field. I felt that my Work was successful as I elicited the emotional response I was aiming for from those who read it. President of Alzheimer's Australia, Ita Buttrose, said that my stories "*captured so well the dementia journey*" and that it was "*an inspiring piece.*" The process of composing *A Slice Without Passionfruit*, has been both exciting and rewarding, igniting my passion for writing.

WORD COUNT: 1500

¹⁸ Warner Bros., United States, 16/12/1982, *Blade Runner* Ridley Scott

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