

CULT: A COMPOSITE NOVEL

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Abstract

Cult (redacted)

The first component of the thesis is a composite novel called *Cult* which falls into two parts with seven narratives in each. Part 1 tracks the protagonist, Ellen, from her first involvement with the cult through to her eventually leaving it. Although fiction, the first half of the book answers the kinds of questions the author is asked when people discover that she was once a sannyasin (a follower of the guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh). While the experiences of meditation, group therapy and communal living are all faithfully rendered within the stories, the need for strong characters, narrative drive and a lightness of touch takes precedence.

Part 2 picks up Ellen's story some twenty or so years later and explores what becomes of her in middle age. It also looks at other groups in society, such as academia, the law and the internet dating community which each have their own jargon, hierarchies, rituals and rules but are not considered to be cults.

The book examines the question raised in the Epigraph, 'how do we be together when we feel so alone' with a focus on relationships other than the familial and the romantic.

Collisions, Chasms and Connections: a Performative Exploration of the Composite Novel Form

The second part of the thesis is both a critical and creative response to three contemporary American books: *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout; *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan; and *Legend of a Suicide* by David Vann. The critical element comprises a close reading of the three books; a chronological reconstruction of their overarching storylines; and a consideration of what their authors have said about writing the books. It concludes that, in the composite novel, the simultaneous presentation of multiple views and storylines operate much like a 3D image to give the impression of depth to the characters and situations rendered. The creative element of the essay is a playful and personal response to the texts.

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And to my dear friends Nooshin Farhid, Clio Barnard, Adam Chodzko, Rosa Ainley, Vicky Wilson and Tom Neville who helped me understand that being a creative requires faith and a willingness to fumble around in the dark for a while;

And to my friends from the sannyasin days whose lives I may have plundered for anecdotes and details;

Also to my family who have had to put up with a great deal and who have supported my endeavours even though they may not have always agreed with my choices;

And finally, to Zoe, for being my first and last trusted reader and inspiring me to go that extra mile by leaving a trail of healthy snacks in the direction of travel.

**COLLISIONS, CHASMS AND CONNECTIONS: A
PERFORMATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE
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Key to Abbreviations:

Abbreviations of three core works when cited within body of text:

Olive Strout, Elizabeth. *Olive Kitteridge*. Great Britain: Pocket Books, 2008.

Goon Squad Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. UK: Cosair, 2011.

Legend Vann, David. *Legend of a Suicide*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

Abbreviations of three core works when cited with page numbers (save for when the text in question is obvious when the page number alone will be given). :

OK Strout, Elizabeth. *Olive Kitteridge*. Great Britain: Pocket Books, 2008.

GS Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. UK: Cosair, 2011.

LoS Vann, David. *Legend of a Suicide*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

1. Introduction – Some of the Parts

Ladies and Gentleman. Roll up. Roll up. Come to the Carnival. For your delight and edification we have put on a most spectacular show. Feast your eyes on the beast woman, OLIVE KITTERIDGE. When you first see her, you will hate her: she's mean and rude and ugly as sin. But by the end of her turn, I guarantee, she will have you under her spell: you will LOVE her WARTS AND ALLⁱ. How does she do it? We will cut her up on a table right in front of you to show you what makes her tick.

Next, marvel at the high wire act that is the GOON SQUAD. They leap across time and perform daredevil feats including EXCESSIVE FOOTNOTES. And, exclusively here for you tonight, it gives me great pleasure to introduce the world's one and only story told in POWERPOINT. We present the GOON SQUAD together with our prize exhibit – the often seen, but rarely talked about (drum roll here...) – ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM!

Finally, to round off tonight's entertainment, we have the son of LEGEND OF A SUICIDE also known as ZOMBIE-BOY. He will break your heart with his longing for the one thing he cannot have: HIS FATHER'S ATTENTION. Gasp in amazement as he appears to you BOTH DEAD AND ALIVE and wreaks revenge BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES.

*

1.1 This

This is the critical or theoretical writing that accompanies *Cult*, the full-length original work developed in conjunction with my research into the composite novel form. As the term 'thesis' conventionally applies to the whole of the work submitted for a degree of PhD, for the avoidance of doubt, I will refer to this as 'the essay'. It is both a critical and creative response to three contemporary American books: *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout (*Olive*); *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan (*Goon Squad*); and *Legend of a Suicide* by David Vann (*Legend*) – collectively referred to as 'the core texts'.

Set against the background of three very different Americas: *Olive* is the story of a woman in late middle age, her immediate family, and the townspeople of Crosby, Maine; *Goon Squad* tracks the fortunes and interactions of Sasha, Bennie

and their hipster associates over several decades; and *Legend* is a son's portrayal of his father in the wake of suicide.

The composite novel form affords its authors the flexibility to mix and match different points of view, styles, voices, time-frames and content within a full-length, *realist*, work of fiction. (Such a combination of techniques within a single novel would normally be considered experimental.) Furthermore, the simultaneous presentation of multiple views and storylines operate much like a 3D image to give the impression of depth to the characters and situations so rendered.

The Critical Work

My initial interest in the core texts was a technical one, analogous to someone who wants to build a guitar and examines three instruments with admired qualities to discover the secrets of their construction. The examination, here, is comprised of a close reading of the core texts; a chronological reordering of the stories they tell; and a consideration of what the authors, themselves, have said about their books.

The chronological reconstruction draws primarily on Gérard Genette's seminal work on narratology (*Narrative Discourse* and *Narrative Discourse Revisited*), and, to a lesser extent, the work of literary theorists and academics, such as Wolfgang Iser, Andrew Warnes and Mikhail Bakhtin. My aim was to find a number of different ways of looking at the material rather than to develop a single, coherent theoretical approach.

Initially, at least, I approached the texts wearing my author's hat – wide-brimmed and battered, if you must know, quite unlike the tall shiny topper I have donned to make this introduction – so the primary driver for the selection was, unashamedly, what would be most helpful to my own project *Cult*. The research was guided by my curiosity and instincts as to what was most interesting *to me* about the books. Each has elements from which I hoped to learn: *Olive* is very accomplished and contains passages of descriptive writing I envy; *Goon Squad* is smart, hip and contemporary – Egan incorporates literary theory into a work of fiction with a lightness of touch that is admirable; and *Legend* tackles emotional territory close to my own personal experience, but with an emotional punch I have, up until recently, been reluctant to attempt. All three books take enormous risks, such as the eponymous protagonist's unlikeability in *Olive*; *Goon Squad*'s proleptic leaps in time and playfulness with form; and the shocking central inconsistency in *Legend*.

At the same time, the core texts can meaningfully be part of the same conversation: they are all by American authors and have been published in the last five years to critical acclaim. *Olive* and *Goon Squad* are Pulitzer Prize winners (*Olive* in 2009 and *Goon Squad* in 2011). *Goon Squad* has also received recognition in the U.K. having been long-listed for the Orange Prize 2011. *Legend* won the Grace Paley Prize in short fiction in 2008 and its central novella “Sukkwan Island” won the Prix Médicis Etranger 2010 and the Premi Llibreter 2011 for best foreign novel in France and Spain respectively. The awards are indicative of a wider endorsement and acceptance of this increasingly popular form.

Another reason for selecting these particular books is that they each present a complex, multifaceted and equivocal account of the characters or situations they portray. This is something I wanted to achieve in my own work. *Cult* contains controversial subject-matter and I was keen that my readers should not reach easy conclusions.

In the critical sections of this essay, I examine technical aspects of the composite novel through the core text that best illustrates the particular technique. With *Olive* I reconstruct the overarching narrative and consider the effects of repetition as well as how the portrayal of the protagonist is distributed over the text; in *Goon Squad*, I look at Egan’s shuffled chronology and the effect of gaps, both temporal and in our knowledge of the situations and characters; and, in the case of *Legend*, I explore the challenges of fictionalising personal experience, particularly when writing in the first person, the role of contingency and the unconscious, and explore the form’s capacity to contain equivocal content.

(a) The Performative Response

The creative element of the essay – as distinct from *Cult*, the creative project – is a performative response to the core texts.

Wolfgang Iser, a key figure in Reader-Response Theory, says, ‘the manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror ...’ (281). The performative aspect of this essay turns this notion on its head and, rather than the text functioning as the mirror; ‘I’, as reader/writer, become the mirror producing a reflection in response to each text. The word ‘reflection’, in this context, embraces a number of its ordinary dictionary meanings:

1.a. The action of an object, surface, etc., in reflecting light, heat, sound, or other form of radiation *without absorbing it* ... (italics my own);

3.c. *fig.* and in extended use. A depiction or reproduction (esp. in art, literature, etc.); an embodiment. Also more generally: anything which arises from, or is a consequence of, something else; an outward manifestation of an underlying condition or cause; ...

7.a. The action or process of thinking carefully or deeply about a particular subject, typically involving influence from one's past life and experiences; contemplation, deep or serious thought or consideration, esp. of a spiritual nature (*The Oxford English Dictionary*).

Reflection can, therefore, be both passive and active and the creative component of this essay articulates my position as a reader (passive) who also writes (active): both immersed in and submissive to the text; as well as provoked by and resisting it. (The act of reading is not entirely passive and I will, in due course, reference further material from Iser in this regard. The point here is that reading is relatively passive when compared to the act of writing: the creative component is an act of writing.)

In respect of *Olive*, the creative component speaks to my methodology; with *Goon Squad*, it is inspired by the innovations of the text as well as its emotional content; and, in the case of *Legend*, it mirrors the depiction of adolescent experience and underlines how gender and geography can shape it. The *Analysis* section considers the need for structural integrity and, in the *Conclusion*, the creative element provides a link between this essay and *Cult*, an acknowledgment and articulation of cross-fertilisation between the creative and critical projects which were developed in tandem. Finally, the *Coda* is a prolonged way of saying 'The End' just as "Fin" is another way of saying 'The End' and ends *Cult*.

The fragmentary form of this essay echoes the ambitions of this hybrid PhD: the creative and critical work lie side by side neither copulating nor turning their backs towards one another, but engaged in the intimate act of sharing a bed and breathing the same textual air. The creative response supplements and comments on the critical work and, in this way, this essay shares one of the ambitions of the books it

considers: that the “totality is not, as it were, a mere heap, but the whole is something *besides* the parts (1045a8 -10)” (italics my own; Aristotle qtd in Cohen).

In the interests of clarity, the creative elements are formatted in a different font: Arial.

1.2 What?

In 2005, Philip Hensher commented that ‘a good number of writers had started exploring the previously blank territory that lies between the collection of short stories and the novel proper’, a trend he had noticed while judging competitions over the previous ten years or so. He closes his piece saying, ‘watching a new form develop is a fascinating experience; with the intermediate form, an important group of shared ideas may be finding a satisfying expression. Now, all we need is a name for it’ (*The Telegraph*). Although all published after his article, the core texts fall squarely into the territory Hensher describes, but is it, in fact, ‘blank territory’?

The Short Story Cycle by Susan Garland Mann (1989) and *The Composite Novel - The Short Story Cycle in Transition* by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris (1995) are two of a handful of books devoted to a consideration of the intermediate form.ⁱⁱ Mann claims her book, including the annotated listing, provides one hundred and twenty examples of short story cycles (8). Dunn and Morris (20-21) detail the precursors of the form which include sacred texts, such as the Bible and the Koran, and frame tales, such as Homer’s *Odyssey* and Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, but focus on ‘the composite novel as an identifiable modern form’ (21) which they ‘believe ... did not mature as a literary genre until the twentieth century’ (22). They cite James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914); Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919); and Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925) amongst the earliest examples (xiii). Their Chronology provides examples of the form and its precursors for every year from 1820 to 1993 with at least ten entries for most of the years from 1986 onwards (xix - xxxi).

Given the long history and burgeoning output of books of this type, the intermediate form is evidently not the ‘blank territory’ Hensher suggests. Perhaps his comments are more pertinent to the U.K. market where the short story has long been neglected and publishers strongly favour the longer form. Interestingly, the cover for *Olive* displayed by Amazon’s U.S. site bears a quote from O: The Oprah Magazine, which calls the book a ‘novel in stories’. The version on the Amazon’s U.K. site

bears a quotation from the Evening Standard, ‘As perfect a novel as you will ever read.’ *Legend* was also published as a story collection in the U.S. and as a novel for the U.K. market (Moore). This no doubt reflects publishers’ assessments of the different appetites for the short story form in the U.S. and U.K. markets.

As for a name: Mann adopts the term *short story cycle* and says ‘there is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated’ (15). Dunn and Morris, whose book is more recent, unearthed a number of contenders:

story cycle, short story cycle, multi-faceted novel, story novel, paranovel, loose-leaf novel, short story composite, rovelle, composite, short story compound, integrated short story collection, anthology novel, modernist grotesque, hybrid novel, story chronicle, short story sequence, genre of return, short story volume, and narrative of community (4).

They give the matter some consideration before rejecting the term *short story cycle* and, instead, opt for *composite novel* (4 - 6). Their rationale is to emphasise the whole, rather than the parts, which is also reflected by their inclusion of the phrase ‘coherent whole’ in their definition:

The composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that - though individually complete and autonomous - are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles’ (2).

However, they use the term ‘short story cycle’ in the subtitle to their book – *The Composite Novel – The Short Story Cycle in Transition* – which suggests an acknowledgment of the prevalence of the term. The territory between “the novel proper and the *mere* collection of stories” (to use Malcolm Cowley’s phrase as quoted and italicised by Dunn and Morris (5)) is a spectrum along which each of the three core texts fall and, in the “Analysis”, I consider the texts in relation to the ‘organising principles’ that link the stories in these kinds of books.

In this essay, I adopt the term *composite novel* for the form. For ease of reference, where a distinction needs to be made, I refer to the parts/chapters/stories of the books as ‘stories’; to the whole book, including the peripheral material, such

as the title page, acknowledgements, epigraphs and so on, as ‘the book’; the chronological story of each book as a whole will be referred to as ‘the overarching narrative’; and its written representation as it appears in the book ‘the text’.

1.3 How?

(a) Chronological Reconstructions

The writer in me wanted to know how the composite novel works on a structural level. The first stage of my research was therefore a technical exercise reconstructing the overarching narrative from all the stories that comprise each of the core texts. One of the purposes was to consider the ‘connections between the temporal *order* of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative’ (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 35, italics in original). Genette performs this exercise in respect of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* in the first chapter of his seminal book on narratology (*Narrative Discourse* 33-85). In his foreword to the book, Jonathan Culler says:

It will prove indispensable to students of fiction, who not only will find in it terms to describe what they have perceived in novels but will also be alerted to the existence of fictional devices which they had previously failed to notice and whose implications they had never been able to consider (7).

Culler’s statement was certainly true of this writer and I was surprised to discover that – once Genette had provided the tools and language to identify and articulate what was going on – the temporal sequencing of a single paragraph could be so complex. Genette painstakingly analyses which pieces of information are subordinate to one another. He also moves from looking at the work on a microstructural level, as he calls it, to ‘examin[ing] the main articulations of the temporal structure’ acknowledging that this would be a far cruder analysis (*Narrative Discourse* 43). He goes on to take large sections of the book comprising dozens of pages in some cases (his section E2 encompasses from page 37 to 142 of the Proust) and considers their temporal relationship to one another (*Narrative Discourse* 42).

The work I undertook on the core texts lies between Genette’s analysis of microstructure and that of macrostructure, as though he had supplied me with a

simple pair of reading glasses through which to see temporal structure when he himself had used a microscope and telescope.

I conducted chronological reconstructions of all three core texts but append the results in respect of *Olive* alone (Appendix A). This is partly to avoid repetition, but also because the temporal mapping proved most illuminating in respect of that particular text. The work on *Goon Squad* and *Legend* was not, however, wasted as the chronological reconstructions forced a structured, close reading of the texts which was, in itself, productive.

(b) **Focalisation**ⁱⁱⁱ

As well as being key to the analysis of temporal issues, Genette's work is also invaluable when it comes to consideration of point of view. He draws a ground-breaking and helpful distinction:

between the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator?* – or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?* (*Narrative Discourse* 186).

He calls the first issue *focalization* (*Narrative Discourse* 189). Narratologists have produced a raft of terminology on the subject made all the more confusing by them sometimes using different terms for the same thing. For example, Franz Stanzel, calls 'the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective', a 'reflector character' (Fludernik 89).

I adopt Genette's terminology where it assists in making a particular point about a text. However, where ordinary literary studies terms, such as *first person narrator*, *point of view* and *free indirect discourse*, suffice, I use those – just as a decorator might select a fine brush to pick out the detail in a ceiling rose and a roller when she needs to cover an entire wall.

In terms of point of view, *Olive* is the most consistent of the books, written in the third person throughout; *Goon Squad* draws greedily from the smorgasbord of available choices (first, second, third and PowerPoint) as might be expected given Egan's propensity for innovation and experimentation; *Legend* is mainly written in

the first person save for the novella which is in the third. In the chapters that follow, I consider point of view in greater depth as is fitting to each of the texts.

It is initially useful, however, to distinguish between a heterodiegetic narrator who is *not* a character in the story, and a homodiegetic narrator who so appears. It should be self-evident that a narrative with a homodiegetic narrator is necessarily written in the first person. The term first person, however, fails to draw a distinction between the narrator who tells the story with the benefit of hindsight (*who speaks* – although I prefer the term ‘who tells’) and the character through whom the text is focalised (*who sees*). The blurring of these two functions can be problematic, as is further explored in the chapter below on *Legend*.

Another useful distinction is that between internal and external focalisation. Genette (who revised some of his ideas in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* following various criticisms of his original text by other narratologists, notably Mieke Bal) puts it like this:

In internal focalization, the focus coincides with a character, who then becomes the fictive “subject” of all the perceptions, including those that concern himself as object... In external focalization, the focus is situated at a point in the diegetic universe [world of the story] chosen by the narrator, *outside every character*, which means that all possibility of information about anyone’s thoughts is excluded (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 74-75).

Additionally, internal focalisation can be further subdivided: *fixed focalisation* where there is a single focalising character; *variable focalisation*, where there are several focalising characters; and *multiple focalisation* – a particular type of variable focalisation in which the same events are narrated through different focalising characters (Jahn 98).

Genette also explains that, ‘any single formula of focalization does not ... always bear on an entire work, but rather on a definite narrative section, which can be very short’ (*Narrative Discourse* 191).

As will be demonstrated, the issue of focalisation is of particular significance to the composite novel as authors have the option of using different modes of focalisation for different stories.

(c) **Say What?**

Barthes put paid to the notion that the writer is the privileged authority in respect of his or her own work. He says, ‘the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, the voice of a single person, the author “confiding” in us’ (875). His complaint is not so much with the author, but with critics who look to an author’s identity and life experiences for a definitive reading of a text.

My project is less concerned with the *meaning* of the texts as with how they achieve their effects. Further, rather than needing to surmise what the authors may have been thinking I have access – as will be seen below – to their stated intentions. Interviews and comments by all three authors are widely available. Strout and Egan have both spoken at length about their books in the context of *Olive* and *Goon Squad* winning Pulitzer Prizes. Strout has given readings and interviews in the usual way and also participated in the Colgate Living Writers series. This involved a lengthy discussion with a panel of faculty and students exploring issues of particular interest to other writers.

Egan’s author website contains a number of resources including information as to the genesis of each of the stories from *Goon Squad* and a PowerPoint presentation of “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” including clips of the songs referenced. Given Egan’s interest in technology, it is fitting that there is also an iTunes app of *Goon Squad* which includes additional material (Egan, *iTunes app*).

Legend received far more critical attention in Europe than it did in the U.S. (its long road to publication is dealt with later), but the shocking twist at the heart of the book, in the context of the autobiographical content, means that it attracted considerable press attention, at least in France, Britain and the Commonwealth (Dunham). Furthermore, Vann was also generous enough to grant me the privilege of an interview with him in September 2010 (Appendix B).

Given all this material, I am able to examine the texts and compare what is on the page with what the authors hoped to achieve. I am not privileging the author’s views; it does not preclude the possibility that they may have produced unintended effects; nor does it deny that, as a reader, mine is only one of many possible interpretations.

This Again

As the Dunn and Morris definition demonstrates, the composite novel negotiates a tension between the independence and interdependence of the stories. Tensions are also contained within a critical/creative hybrid PhD: between academic convention and the push to be innovative; the injunction that the critical work should not be self-reflexive countered with the requirement to ‘expound on the connections’ between critical and creative work at *Viva Voce*.^{iv} Under the force of effort required to embrace these tensions, this essay turned into an experiment in its own right: a laboratory in which texts were dissected; a frictional place where the creative rubs up against the critical; a forge where form is hammer and anvil *and* the matter being shaped (form *is* content: content *is* form); life as experienced in the moment and the understanding that only comes with hindsight; and a fictional space where the truth is approached by making things up.

*

And so, the stage has finally been set; the Big Top has been erected and the props set in place (not Vladimir and his wife, ladies and gentlemen but our old but perfectly serviceable narratological tool-kit.)^v Our three artists are in the wings, waiting to come on.

Are you all sitting comfortably?

I can't hear you. Was that a 'yes'?

That's better. Alrighty. We'll dim the lights and, without further ado, LET'S GET ON WITH THE SHOW. The first to take to our stage is the incredible, the indescribable and the often irritable OLIVE KITTERIDGE! Please give her a very warm BIG TOP welcome.

ⁱ Olive's warts feature in "A Little Burst" (*OK* 64-65)

ⁱⁱ There are a number of books on specific short story cycles but only a few that consider the genre as a whole. The J.G. Kennedy book (*Works Consulted*) looks at eleven specific short story sequences and James Nagel's book (*Works Consulted*) looks at eight. Forrest Ingram's book (see *Works Consulted*) was not in fact consulted because it was written in 1971 and therefore considerably older than the Mann and Dunn and Morris. Also the latter book refers to it and calls it 'the first published book-length study of this incipient genre' and takes its material into account (4).

ⁱⁱⁱ I spell 'focalisation' with an 's', but the translations spell it with a 'z' and I quote the material accordingly.

^{iv} From the Code of Practice for Quality Assurance (Research Students): Approval of New Research Programmes PhD in Text, Practice as Research. (University of Kent: School of English.)

^v Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) was a Russian Formalist who worked on Russian folktales and who devised a list of thirty-one functions that are the basic building of the hundred tales he analysed (Barry 226-227).

2. Olive Kitteridge - The Art of Dissection

Olive Kitteridge lies across the dissection table, her organs already extracted. It goes without saying that the heart is no longer beating. Looking at this pitiful sight, my concerns about the death of the author and the death of the novel are eclipsed. It is this particular book for which I grieve, my grief sharpened by the knowledge that, in my clumsy attempts to discover what made it come alive, I have killed it.

There's a knock at my door. You look pale and I wonder if the placard-waving mob outside has unnerved you. I remove my rubber gloves and bloodied apron and beckon you into the laboratory. You avoid looking at the body and I wonder if you have the stomach for this.

'Help yourself to coffee,' I say.

Our old coffee maker with its glass jug and rusting steel plate does not look out of place in a laboratory and I have to point it out to you. Lying next to it, I see my glasses. They were a gift from Genette and I really should take better care as, without them, I'd have trouble seeing anything at all.

'The first task I worked on was reconstructing skeleton,' I say. 'A painstaking and tedious exercise. Thankfully, it yielded results. You can take a look while you're drinking your coffee.'

I hand you Appendix A which summarises my findings.

*

Olive is comprised of thirteen stories, all of which feature the eponymous Olive Kitteridge: in some, she is the protagonist; in others, she is merely mentioned in conversation. However, taken together as a whole, the stories create a convincing portrayal of a complex and conflicted woman in late middle age.

Many of the findings in this chapter come from the chronological reconstruction performed on *Olive*. Appendix A contains the details: A.1 describes my methodology which involved mapping the page number of the book against the Olive Kitteridge's age; A.2 is an example of pages from the working document used to create the Excel spreadsheet; A.3 shows how the inconsistencies in the timeline

(‘chronological glitches’) were deduced; A.4 looks at the issue of ‘frequency’, and sets out some of the repetitions in the text; and, finally, A.5 is the spreadsheet itself.

Titled “Shades of Olive,” the spreadsheet provides a graphical representation of the text. It shows the relative length of each story, both as compared with the other stories and with the text as a whole. It also records some of the significant events in Olive’s life showing her age when they took place (deduced or explicitly specified in the text). The columns that represent the stories have been coloured in to represent how deeply the story is ‘saturated’ with Olive’s presence. Two columns have no colour at all as Olive is barely mentioned in those particular stories; six are all the darkest shade because Olive is the protagonist of those stories and, when internally focalised, they are focalised through her eyes.

In *Forensic Findings*, I set out some of the temporal issues which were discovered through conducting the chronological reconstruction; in *Primary Wounds and Secondary Hurts*, I examine Strout’s use of repetition in the book; and, in *Shades of Olive*, I consider the extent of Olive’s presence in each of the stories (including Strout’s use of free indirect discourse) and examine the techniques used by Strout to render the central conflict between Olive and her son Christopher.

2.1 Forensic Findings

a) Temporal sequencing of the stories

One of the issues that became apparent from the chronological reconstruction is that the time of narration of the stories is, for the most part, chronological save for in two or three places, such as the second segment “Incoming Tide”, in which Olive tells Kevin Coulson that Henry is ‘thinking about retiring early’ (OK 42) even though the first segment “Pharmacy” is narrated after Henry’s retirement. Also, in “Ship in a Bottle”, Julie and Winnie Harwood discuss Olive: “she teaches math,” Winnie said’ (OK 195) whereas in “Tulips”, an earlier story, Olive is described as having retired from teaching five years earlier (OK 143). Finally in “Basket of Trips” (which falls between “Tulips” and “Ship in a Bottle”), Olive claims to have only told Bill and Bunny Newton about Christopher’s divorce (OK 168) whereas in the previous story, “Tulips”, Olive is surprised by how easy it was to tell Louise this news (OK 154).

From my initial ‘sense impression’ of the book, I would have guessed that the time of narration of the stories was more chaotic. The many analepses may account for this. For example, we are told of Olive’s infatuation with Jim O’Casey and his

death in the very first story, “Pharmacy”, focalised through Henry, but we only learn Olive’s version of the story – how she and Jim met, how she fell in love with him and was prepared to leave Henry, if Jim had asked her to – in the eleventh story “Security”. In a similar vein, information about Olive’s relationship with her son Christopher is also gradually revealed across the stories.

b) Time of narration of the stories in the book

Secondly, I discovered that the time of narration begins later in Olive’s life and covers a shorter period of time than I realised. Again, my ‘felt-sense’ of the time period covered by the book was coloured by the numerous analepses. According to my analysis, Olive is no younger than sixty-four at the time of narration of “Pharmacy” which would make Henry sixty-three, consistent with him having ‘retired from the pharmacy – earlier than planned ...’ (OK 143). Olive is seventy-four in the last story, “River” (OK 262). The time of narration of the book therefore covers roughly ten years of Olive’s life taking her from late middle age into early old age. Analepses fill in some of the background detail.

Strout’s agent told her that she would also like to see Olive as a younger woman. Strout says she thought, ‘well, you know, not going to happen ... she (Olive) was who she was for me at this time in her life’ (Colgate Reading). *Olive* is a book about a woman at a particular time of her life living in a particular environment. As a result, a number of the scenarios portrayed by the book address the challenges of ageing. The tight focus gives the book the feel of a novel notwithstanding the separate stories and narrative arcs. The factors that contribute towards giving a composite novel an overall sense of coherence are further considered in section 5.1 below.

c) Chronological glitches

Authors are free to take liberties with time. Two examples are Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Strange Case of Benjamin Button* which shows one of the protagonists getting younger over time rather than ageing; and Audrey Neifenegger’s *The Time Traveller’s Wife* in which one of the lovers is able to time travel. *Olive*, however, is not that kind of a book. It is writing that, in the words of John Gardener, ‘depends on verisimilitude’ (22). As such, it is a realist book and the contract between author and reader leads us to expect a coherent chronology.

The chronological reconstruction shows that there are a couple of glitches in Olive's overarching timeline. By this I mean that the information we are given about Olive's age (whether explicitly or by deduction) is inconsistent across the stories. In particular, the timing of Henry's stroke is flawed: if some narratives are right about this; others must be wrong. Also, conflicting information is given about Christopher's age at the time of her father's suicide (see Appendix A.3 for full details). The reconstruction therefore reveals something about the text that was not evident to the book's author or editors. This is notwithstanding the fact that Strout claims to take a great deal of care over her work: 'I work obsessively. I'm a very obsessive person about my sentences and about my stories... I've always been a very careful worker and I intend to stay that way' (Queens).

I have no doubt that Strout is a 'very careful worker'. Her training as a lawyer (Colgate Panel) displays itself in the way she often identifies Olive's age at the time of an event and specifies the length of time that has passed between events, in much the same way that a lawyer might provide such details in a client's statement to 'establish the facts'. The discrepancies I have identified are relatively minor: a year or so out in a couple of places and, depending on one's interpretation of the information provided, a few years out when it comes to Olive's father's suicide. Certainly, I did not notice the discrepancies prior to carrying out this 'forensic' exercise, despite reading the book carefully twice.

This raises the question: Does it matter? To what extent does a fictional character *need* to have the attributes of a 'real' person in order to be believable? It is a question to which I allude in the creative component of this chapter.

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Julian Barnes' narrator, Braithwaite, mocks the kinds of errors pounced upon by critics, such as because Piggy is short-sighted, he could not possibly have used his glasses to start a fire (*Lord of the Flies*); and that Madame Bovary's eyes change colour in Flaubert's novel of the same name. He calls the latter type of errors: "internal mistakes", when the writer claims two incompatible things within his own creation (77-78). The chronological glitches I identified fall into that latter category.

Barnes' narrator is wry on the subject. He says:

I suspect that in the writer's moments of private candour, he probably admits the pointlessness of describing eyes. He slowly imagines the character, moulds her

into shape, and then – probably the last thing of all – pops a pair of glass eyes into those empty sockets. Eyes? Oh yes, she'd better have eyes, he reflects, with a weary courtesy (78-79).

A fictional character is a construction rendered through the medium of squiggles on a page and the question of whether a character can have all the attributes of a real person is a demonstrably a ridiculous one. And yet I have sympathy with the position Barnes' narrator attributes to Professor Ricks:

If the factual side of literature becomes unreliable, then ploys such as irony and fantasy become much harder to use. If you don't know what's true, or what's meant to be true, then the value of what isn't true, or isn't meant to be true, becomes diminished (77).

Realist fiction demands that the author complies with certain conventions, unless he or she is deliberately choosing to flout them. In the case of *Olive*, the reader expects a coherent chronology, but it only matters that the reader is convinced by the text in its *published form*. The chronological reconstruction is akin to going behind the scenes and discovering that a two-dimensional store front has no actual shop behind it, and that the sound of the crashing waves emanates from a CD player. *In the context of this essay*, what is most interesting about the 'chronological glitches' is not that they are 'errors' (as per Madam Bovary's eye colour), but the discovery that Olive's overarching chronology is less significant in the context of a composite novel than it might be in a more conventional one: the point here is that, in *Olive*, these glitches are 'masked' by the form of the book.

2.2 Primary Wounds and Secondary Hurts

'Stop Librisection; Stop Librisection.'

The protestors have started chanting again: one of my colleagues must be leaving the building. You glance at the window and blink hard. Since photographs of the work we do here were leaked to the press, our facility on the hill has been targeted by Anti-Librisectionists. While most of them truly

believe in their cause, others are hangers-on who loathe the French and are using this opportunity as a platform to vent their feelings.^{vi}

‘How do you stand it?’ you ask.

‘People are amazingly adaptable,’ I reply. ‘It’s how we survive.’

I close the blinds by a couple of turns causing shade to stripe the dissection table and the body that lies eviscerated there. For the first time since entering the room, you focus your attention on it.

‘Come,’ I say. ‘Examine the victim for yourself and talk me through her injuries.’

You hesitate: squeamish, I assume. But you swig the last of your coffee, approach the table and attend to the task with an air of detached professionalism that I had not expected from you. You provide a running commentary as you work your way up the body, noting the precise position of the injuries as you locate them:

‘The wounds are many and various: Olive’s father committed suicide (38, 71); Jim O’Casey, who Olive is in love with, dies unexpectedly when he drives his car off the road (29, 213); Olive and Henry are held hostage in a hospital bathroom (104 -124); Christopher marries a bossy woman named Suzanne (142) and they move to California four months later (142); he and Suzanne divorce after a year of marriage but he chooses to remain in California (144-145); Henry suffers a massive stroke (146); Christopher remarries and does not tell Olive until after the event (222); Henry dies in the nursing home, ‘paralyzed and unknowing’ before Christopher’s baby is born (252).

‘What do you deduce from this?’ I ask.

‘It’s odd,’ you say. ‘The primary traumas are masked by other wounds which, superficially at least, appear far more serious. It’s only when you consider the condition of the body as a whole that you fully understand what’s happened here.’

‘Good,’ I say. ‘Well done.’

*

(a) Food and Loneliness in Crosby, Maine

In her glowing review of *Olive* ('quietly stunning, masterfully crafted, buoyed by wisdom') Robin Black considers "A Different Road" to be akin to a manifesto because its drama resides, not in Olive and Henry being held hostage at gunpoint, as you might imagine, but in the things they say to one another in the belief they are about to die. Black says of the story:

Strout explicitly makes a point implicit throughout the entire book: it's a mistake to assume that biggest, most evidently dramatic actions carry the greatest consequence. A marital spat gone awry can be more damaging – and more compelling – than an armed gunman any time. Real drama is to be found in what happens between us all, every day.

To depict 'what happens between us all, every day,' Strout uses the narrative device of frequency or iteration.

Once again, the language and concepts developed by Genette help to identify and articulate what is going on in the text. In a chapter devoted to the issue of frequency, he sums up the four options available to an author: 'Schematically, we can say that a narrative, whatever it is, may tell once what happened once, *n* times what happened *n* times, *n* times what happened once, once what happened *n* times' (*Narrative Discourse* 114).

In this section, I consider Strout's use of Genette's second option which she uses to signal to the reader what really matters in the book.

Food and hunger, along with loneliness, are repeatedly referenced across the stories. (Suicide is another repeated motif but, given that *Legend* focusses on the subject so explicitly, it is not one that I consider here.) In Appendix A.4, I set out a number of the repetitions. As can be seen, being thin ('stick-thin' in some cases) is frequently equated with sexual attractiveness; as is its opposite – the association of putting on weight with becoming less attractive. Harmon worries that his wife has stopped having sex with him 'because he'd gotten fat' (*OK* 83); after Jim O'Casey's sudden death, Olive 'lost weight, looked better than ever for a while, which lacerated her heart with the irony. Henry reached for her often those nights' (*OK* 214).

It is hard to know whether this is Strout's own views leaking into the text or whether it is simply a fact of middle age that she wishes to portray. The potential consequences of an obsession with being thin are, however, confronted head-on in

“Starving”. In the story, Nina, an anorexic teenager eventually dies from her illness. In the circumstances, Strout cannot be accused of promoting the virtues of being too thin, despite the other references identified.

Hunger has a different but related meaning in the book. Again, see Appendix A.4 for examples. Olive – in addressing Nina (“Starving”) and Julie Harwood (“Ship in a Bottle”) respectively – is telling the younger women that being middle aged does not mean the end of unfulfilled desires. It is something that, given their age, they are unlikely to yet comprehend.

Hunger, here, equates to drive or will. Nina has lost the will to live and does not want to eat; stick-thin Louise had lost all interest in life. In relation to Olive herself, in “Security”, ‘a sudden surging *greediness* for life’ is equated with hope, ‘she remembered what hope was, and this was it’ (emphasis added; *OK* 203).

As will be seen from Appendix A.4, the repeated references to food and hunger, when extracted altogether, seem overwhelming but, when the reader encounters them, they fit into their host stories quite naturally. None the less, the cumulative effect has an impact on the reader: their presence is impossible to ignore.

In an academic discussion, a reader ^{vii} comments that, unlike in many books, in *Olive*, food is more than just part of the setting (Colgate Panel). Strout replies:

Right. It’s a way of life. The food is not complicated food; it’s not sensual food ... so it’s a kind of food that’s either there for immediate gratification or else to survive and go on with another day. And that’s part of the area and the time that I’m writing about. I’m very interested in time and place and the intersection of character with time and place (Colgate Panel).

But there’s more to food in *Olive* than simply being a culturally accurate detail. Food is used as a metaphor. The most obvious example is the two extended food metaphors on the final page of the book:

... love was not to be tossed away carelessly, as if it were a tart on a platter with others that got passed around again ... And if her platter had been full with the goodness of Henry and she had found it burdensome, had flicked it off crumbs at a time, it was because she had now known what one should know: that day after day was unconsciously squandered.

And so, if this man next to her now was not a man she would have chosen before this time, what did it matter? He most likely wouldn't have chosen her either. But here they were, and Olive pictured two slices of Swiss cheese pressed together, such holes they brought to this union – what pieces life took out of you (*OK* 270).

Henry's 'goodness' is compared with a tart which was 'unconsciously squandered' by Olive. She embarks on a relationship with Jack, incomplete because of her life experiences ('what pieces life took out of you.'). The image of the pressing together of slices of Swiss cheese is odd, but suggests that their union will – to an extent, but by no means perfectly – compensate for the deficiencies they each bring to it. The use of two such metaphors in such close proximity and at such a critical juncture of the book signals the significance of food to the text.

Food is a means by which we meet one of our essential human needs but it also has a powerful social function as we see from Henry wanting to invite couples to dinner in "Pharmacy," and the preparation of food for the wake in "Basket of Trips"; it can be familiar and comforting, or strange and off-putting – Olive is thrown by the type of food Christopher offers her in "Security" (*OK* 207) and is comforted by the family visit to the ice cream shop until she later realises she has dropped butterscotch sauce down her blouse (*OK* 226); it can represent care as with Olive feeding Henry in the nursing home in "Tulips".

So, food has many functions in the book but, as important to *Olive*, is that our relationship with food is a daily one and this requires repetition to make the point. The struggle to manage our food intake is ongoing and shows the ways in which people indulge or deny themselves. As the story of *Goldilocks* teaches us, getting anything 'just right' is a difficult art: in *Olive*, the characters are shown to be Daddy and Mummy bears, either eating too much or too little. It is a manifestation of human frailty.

Loneliness

Loneliness is one of the greatest fears of both the protagonists and of the minor characters in the book. Once again, I cite some examples and explain their context in Appendix A.4. Here, I will consider the theme in relation to Olive. In "Tulips," we learn that 'in the case of Olive Kitteridge, she found herself positively squeezed to

death by an unendurable sense of loneliness' (*OK* 142). It is a feeling that predates Henry's stroke. She says of her marriage:

in the midst of it all there had been times when she'd felt a loneliness so deep that once, not so many years ago, having a cavity filled, the dentist's gentle turning of her chin with his soft fingers had felt to her like a tender kindness of almost excruciating depth, and she had swallowed with a groan of longing, tears springing to her eyes. ("Are you all right, Mrs Kitteridge?" the dentist had said) (*OK* 224).

The loneliness felt by Olive, despite her marriage to Henry, goes some way to explaining her vulnerability to an infatuation with Jim O'Casey.

In "River", the final story, after Olive discovers Jack collapsed on the path, he pleads with her, "Don't leave me alone," (*OK* 254). When he tells her that he doesn't want to die alone, Olive replies with characteristic candour: "Hell. We're always alone. Born alone. Die alone. What difference does it make? Long as you don't shrivel for years in a nursing home like my poor husband did. That's my fear" (*OK* 255).

In the final scene of the book, deciding whether or not to become involved with Jack, Olive thinks, 'To sit down beside him would be to close her eyes to the gaping loneliness of this sunlit world' (*OK* 269).

By the repeated references, Strout is telling us that loneliness is a universal affliction. Paradoxically, this makes us feel that we are not so alone, which is one of the consolations of literature.

Marriage or a relationship may appear to be the antidote to loneliness – as is suggested by the book's ending – but it is not a panacea. *Olive* also interrogates the nature of marriage. Christopher's first marriage fails after little more than a year, but most of the stories address issues that arise in long-standing unions. Does it matter if passion fades? (Bonnie and Harmon in "Starving"); Can marriage survive infidelity? ("Winter Concert"); What happens when one party falls for someone else? (as with Henry in "Pharmacy"; Olive with Jim O'Casey; and Harmon falling for Daisy); What if one spouse has a debilitating stroke? (Henry). These questions show that

when people get married it does not necessarily mean ‘happily ever after,’ and that, in life, nothing and no one can be taken for granted.

In “Security”, Olive acknowledges the sense of lack people can feel despite having the things (such as relationships and children) that they expect to make them happy:

Olive had a sense of just how desperately hard every person in the world was working to get what they needed. For most, it was a sense of safety, in the sea of terror that life increasingly became. People thought that love would do it, and maybe it did. But even if ... it took three different kids with three different fathers, it was never enough, was it? (*OK* 211)

The story contains both explicit and implicit references to 9/11: ‘those planes ripped through the towers’ (*OK* 200); and heightened airport security, and Christopher’s attitude to the Pakistanis who run the corner store. But – as with “A Different Road” – the real drama of the story lies in the daily experience of people’s unmet needs: for both Olive’s new daughter-in-law (as the above quotation makes plain); and for Olive with her inability to reconcile with her son.

Strout is explicit about her project to reveal the internal lives of ordinary people:

they’re not quiet, because our internal life is never quiet ...we are wrestling with all sorts of...and then there’s this outer world: What’s our relationship with that? But the interior things that are going on in, while we’re trying to cope with our spouse, our changing spouse, our changing circumstances, the aging process, our relationship to young people changes – all this kind of stuff was very interesting to me (*The Morning News*).

Loneliness; a fractured relationship with one’s child; struggles with weight; an unidentifiable sense of lack; and the uncertainties that come with any life, are like an underlying sickness or malaise – suffered more universally, and for longer, and less easy to pinpoint on any particular cause, than the more obvious wounds of a husband’s stroke or being held hostage at gunpoint. It is the quotidian nature of such sufferings that requires Strout’s use of repetition to convey their insidious prevalence and power.

2.3 Shades of Olive

For a book titled *Olive Kitteridge*, Olive's role across the stories is surprisingly limited. This distribution is facilitated by the composite novel form which allows Olive to be the protagonist in some of the stories and for secondary characters to take centre stage in others. Olive is then 'seen' through their eyes, sometimes only by way of a cameo, or by virtue of merely being mentioned in a conversation. This allows us to see Olive as they do, as one of the townsfolk of Crosby who plays a greater or lesser role in their lives.

In addition, Strout's narrative technique allows Olive's presence and that of other characters to be strongly *felt* on the page. When asked about her narrator's point of view in *Olive*, Strout is endearingly (to my mind anyway) naïve about what to call it and replies: 'Yes. It's something. It has a name. Somebody told me about some review when it was named. Here I am teaching an MFA programme but ... as my students know, it's not ... I don't ... But it's something ... to get the cadence of that sort of person' (Queens).

Her ignorance of the name for this technique – more commonly known as “free indirect style” or “free indirect discourse” – demonstrates that you can be expert in its use without necessarily being able to articulate what you are doing.

Louisa Thomas explains Strout's technique for the readership of *The New Yorker*, in what may well have been the review to which Strout refers:

Strout's prose is quickened by her use of the “free indirect” style, in which a third-person narrator adopts the words or tone a particular character might use. “The tulips bloomed in ridiculous splendor” is a narrative statement — but “ridiculous” is very much Olive Kitteridge's word. Similarly, in a description of a pianist, the clucking of communal disapproval creeps in: “Her face revealed itself too clearly in a kind of simple expectancy no longer appropriate for a woman of her age.” These moments animate Strout's prose in the same way that a forceful person alters the atmosphere in a room.

For the lay reader, Thomas' explanation is more than adequate but, for the purposes of this essay, we need a more sophisticated set of tools to articulate Strout's technique. For this, at least initially, we again turn to Genette.

In Genette's terminology, the narrator of all the stories in *Olive* is heterodiegetic with external focalisation that frequently slips into internal focalisation through one or more characters in the book: that is, the focalisation is variable. However, external and internal focalisation provide only a binary classification (simply "in" or "out") and fail to identify gradations of authorial or psychic distance. Genette acknowledges this in his later book and, largely, adopts Brian McHale's 'seven degrees of increasing "mimeticism" within free indirect discourse (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 57). An example of different degrees of mimeticism is shown below in a consideration of the story "Pharmacy" which opens the book.

"Pharmacy", when internally focalised, is seen through the eyes of Olive Kitteridge's husband, Henry. It starts, however, with external focalisation:

For many years Henry Kitteridge was a pharmacist in the next town over, driving every morning on snowy roads, or rainy roads, or summer-time roads ... (OK 3).

By the next page, the style of narration has pulled in closer to Henry:

Inwardly, he suffered the quiet trepidations of a man who had witnessed twice in childhood the nervous breakdowns of a mother... (OK 4).

At the heart of the story, the reader has full access to Henry's thoughts and imaginings:

As he drove home slowly along the narrow roads, the darkness seemed alive and sinister as it pressed against the car windows. He pictured moving far upstate, living in a small house with Denise. He could find work somewhere up north; she could have a child. A little girl who would adore him; girls adored their fathers (OK 24).

Although it may seem odd to open the book with a story in which Olive plays a relatively minor role, Strout has her reasons:

I started with Henry because ... he's just a dearer presence on the page and the reader is not going to be initially put off. So that it's Henry's story that we start with and hopefully a story that people want to follow ... that first brief image of

Olive is very harsh and I guess I was hoping that Henry's softness would sort of carry the reader through that story '(Colgate Panel).

Olive is undoubtedly a difficult woman. The fact that Henry loves her and cannot bring himself to leave her, despite his intense feelings for Denise, puts the reader on notice to look out for what it is he finds attractive in Olive, for all her very evident shortcomings. Also, given that a key *function* of Henry in the book is to act as a foil to Olive's indomitable personality, access to Henry's inner world from the outset, prevents him from becoming a mere cipher.

"Pharmacy" is followed by "Incoming Tide" which, along with "Starving," are the two stories where Olive is not the protagonist but, none the less, plays a significant role. In both, she is portrayed as having kind and uncanny instincts, which contrast with how she is shown to relate to most people, particularly her immediate family. In "Incoming Tide", Olive's intervention transforms Kevin Coulson's intention to kill himself:

At the very moment Kevin became aware of liking the sound of her voice, he felt adrenaline pour through him, the familiar, awful intensity, the indefatigable system that wanted to endure. He squinted hard toward the ocean. Great gray clouds were blowing in, and yet the sun, as though in contest, streamed yellow rays beneath them so that parts of the water sparkled with frenzied gaiety (*OK* 39).

The sound of Olive's voice acts like an injection of life-saving medication on Kevin and the weather reflects the battle between dark and light being fought within him. At the story's end, Kevin dives into the ocean to save Patty – a scene in which Olive is also key – and the sun flashes through each wave and with Patty holding onto Kevin 'with a fierceness that matched the power of the ocean' and he observes, 'oh, insane, ludicrous, unknowable world! Look how she wanted to live, look how she wanted to hold on' (*OK* 47).

The implication is that, after this, Kevin will also want to hold onto life. Olive has therefore been instrumental in the saving of two lives – Patty's and Kevin's.

Olive is, however, despite her best efforts, unable to save Nina, the anorexic teenager in "Starving". When she weeps at the sight her, Harmon, the character

through whom the story is focalised says, ‘If there was anyone in town Harmon believed he would never see cry, Olive was that person’ (*OK* 96). His statement adds credibility to this seemingly out-of-character behaviour of Olive’s. She reaches out to Nina, ‘She started to move away, stopped when she was near the girl. Hesitantly, she raised her hand, started to put it down, then raised it again, and touched the girl’s head’ (*OK* 96).

Whether she is so tentative because she does not want to startle the girl, or because the gesture is uncharacteristic of Olive, or indeed both, is unclear but it is in stark contrast to other ‘head-touching’ moments in the book. For example in “A Little Burst” – focalised through Olive – she watches her soon to be daughter-in-law comfort a little girl, ‘But the gesture, the smooth cupping of the little girl’s head, the way Suzanne’s hand in one quick motion caressed the fine hair and thin neck, has stayed with Olive. It was like watching some woman dive from a boat and swim easily up to the dock. A reminder how some people could do things others could not’ (*OK* 64).

The implication is that Olive, herself, is incapable of such a gesture. Also, in “Basket of Trips”, also focalised through Olive, who says, ‘she would like to rest a hand on Marlene’s head, but this is not the kind of thing Olive is especially able to do’ (*OK* 180).

Olive’s gesture in reaching out to Nina in “Starving” ends up with the girl putting her head in Olive’s lap and Olive stroking her hair (*OK* 96). The situation is transformed in a way that Harmon finds ‘astonishing and unworldly’ (*OK* 97).

In four of the stories, Olive’s role could be played by any generically similar woman, by which I mean that her ‘Oliveness’ is not essential to the story’s arc and, as readers, we learn nothing new of importance about her.

In “The Piano Player” and “Winter Concert”, Olive and Henry are shown going for a meal and attending a concert respectively and, as such, socialising around town like any ordinary couple. Both stories confirm that Henry is ‘a dear’. In addition, in “Winter Concert” Bob Houlton wonders how Henry puts up with Olive (*OK* 130) and later, his wife, Jane, tells him that it’s because Henry loves her (*OK* 133).

The fact that Olive was a schoolteacher is useful in setting up her connections with other characters in the town. In “Ship in a Bottle” and “Criminal”, Olive is merely mentioned. She was the former teacher of one of the characters in the stories

– Julie Harwood and Rebecca respectively – and had made unusual comments in that capacity. If published as stand-alone stories, those passages could easily be deleted without any real consequence, however, in the context of a composite novel, Olive appears to have been shoe-horned into the stories to meet the needs of the larger project.

This leaves only six narratives: “A Little Burst”, “A Different Road”, “Tulips”, “Basket of Trips”, “Security” and “River” i.e. about half the book, in which Olive is a key (or the key) character. This balance is perhaps surprising as, by calling the book *Olive Kitteridge*, Strout could not have given a clearer indication that, cumulatively, it is Olive’s story. Why then does Strout’s narrator look away, and so often? Strout explains:

I think that to use different narrators actually helps the reader ... Olive is such a complicated character that in order to see it from different points of view—the way I chose to construct the book—I did that to give people a break from the full-front effect of her, and also because it helps me, and I think it helps the reader, understand that we’re all more complicated than we appear. There are different aspects of Olive, and these different ways to look at her, I think, help to bring that out (*The Morning News*).

(From the analysis above we know that, rather than having different narrators, the book is variably focalised and when it is internally focalised it is through different characters.) It is the composite novel form that allows Strout to give Olive such a minor role in so many of the stories. In the “Chronological Glitches”, I suggest that the form reduces the importance of a strict chronology across the text when considered as a whole: in a similar vein, here, the conventional role and function of a protagonist is also modified by the form. In some of the narratives we are exposed to the full roundness and glare of Olive; in others, she is mainly in shadow and we see only the thinnest crescent: what matters is her presence, orbiting the text and the town of Crosby, like a wart-faced moon.

Many awful things happen to Olive (as listed in the creative element that opens section 2.2, “Primary Wounds and Secondary Hurts”). However, because Christopher’s marriage to the bossy Suzanne and his subsequent defection to

California, and his refusal to return to Crosby following his divorce, are repeatedly referenced in the text (see Appendix A.4); we understand Olive's fractured relationship with Christopher to be the greatest source of conflict and suffering in her life. Strout therefore tells us, '*n* times what happened once', using Genette's third option in relation to frequency, to make her point (*Narrative Discourse* 114).

It is only in "Security" (the eleventh of thirteen stories), that we gain an understanding of Christopher's view of their conflicted relationship because, having been uncommunicative thus far, he finally starts to speak:

adding to her confusion was the additional factor of her son's loquaciousness. She had seldom heard him speak so passionately or so long, and she was quite certain that she had never heard him use the word *shit*. She laughed, a false, hard sound (*OK* 204).

This passage contains a rare example where the shift in narrator – from being internally focalised through a character (in this case Olive) to being externally focalised with the description of her laugh – jars. In many ways, this failing highlights the skill with which Strout has used the technique in the rest of the book.

The change in Christopher is explained when we learn that he and his second wife Ann are in therapy (*OK* 222-223).^{viii} Even here, Christopher's voice is only heard through dialogue. Unlike Henry, none of the stories are focalised through him. Strout explains her method:

I decided to keep Christopher out of having his own point of view... because I thought it would upset the balance. This was primarily Olive's book, somewhat Henry's book, but to give Christopher a point of view would take away from the reader's experience of what I was hoping the reader would feel – her blindness. She's so blind for quite a while in the book. She's blind to what she's doing and that was interesting to me ... What did she do? She can't quite remember. And we all have huge denial about our own behaviour so I was interested in that. So Christopher does get to speak but we're not sure, maybe how authentic that is or ... we don't really know and it's that ambiguity that I wanted to keep (Charlotte).

Strout has made an authorial decision to tell the story, as Olive sees it, and to replicate Christopher's dialogue, as Olive hears it; but denies the reader access to

Christopher's inner-thoughts. It is less of an invitation to 'take sides,' than one to empathise with Olive who, over the course of the book, becomes less blind to her own behaviour. The narrative question is not, 'Will Christopher and Olive become reconciled?' But, rather, 'Will Olive understand the part she has played in their fractured relationship?' It is an exploration of this latter question that needs Strout to render the relationship in the way she has.

In an earlier story "Tulips", Olive is 'flooded with images of Christopher' involving her punishing him and shouting at him (*OK* 145), but she's uncertain whether these memories are true: 'Maybe she hadn't yelled that' (*OK* 151). It is only in "River", the final story, that Olive finally acknowledges culpability and regret over treatment of Christopher: "I did hit my son... Sometimes when he was little. Not just spanked. Hit" (*OK* 269). Olive eyes are finally open to the impact of her actions and this resolves this narrative arc of this thread of the story. For the romantics amongst us, Jack responds by nodding 'one nod', and so accepts Olive despite her treatment of Christopher (*OK* 269).

The composite novel form enables our knowledge of Olive, a complicated, conflicted, forthright woman, to come from the cumulative and kaleidoscopic effect of 'seeing' her interact with different people and in different situations and from different points of view. Strout's use of free indirect discourse gives us access to Olive's inner thoughts.

Readers have been equally forthright in sharing their feelings about Olive with Strout:

Some people have told me they absolutely love her, and some people have said they can't stand her but they're still very drawn to the book ... I hope that even if they have a negative response to much of Olive's behavior they are maybe still drawn into this humanity that is underneath all of her action[s] (*The Morning News*).

Olive's likeability, or otherwise, is hardly the point: the important thing for a book intended to be a portrayal of a fictional character is that, when we come to the end, we feel we know her. By this benchmark, *Olive* is a resounding success.

I go over to my laptop, tap in the password and pull up a quotation. I have to sit some distance from the screen to see the text as, again, I've mislaid my glasses. I read it out aloud to you: A person's authentic nature is a series of shifting, variegated planes that establish themselves as he relates to different people; it is created by and appears within the framework of his interpersonal relationships (Dick).

'Who said that?' you ask.

'Philip Dick,' I reply.

'The *Blade Runner* chap?'

'Yes, although the story he wrote was called something about androids and dreams and electronic sheep ...'

We return to the dissection table. 'They're not real people are they?' you say.

'No they're not.'

'But they're *like* real people?'

'In some ways they're more real,' I reply.

The screen saver on my laptop has kicked in – photographs of me giving a conference paper last year, of me posed in front of a statue in a gallery, of me in shorts and flip-flops on the beach. You look over to see what I am looking at and the iconic photograph of Olive on the dissection table, the one responsible for the protest outside, slides across the screen. In this uncropped image, our ancient coffee maker and my glasses are clearly visible.

Your expression flickers as you square this new information about me with your idea of who you thought I was. You now know that I must have been the one to leak the photographs to the press. Will you tell anyone? I want to ask you. But I know better. I return my attention to the body on the table and we both carry on as though nothing untoward has happened.

Later, as I show you to the door, I say, 'I hope you found it interesting...'

'Fascinating', you reply. 'It's been a real eye-opener.'

^{vi} This is a reference to Derrida (born in Algeria but schooled and taught in France), Barthes, Genette and Deleuze and the schism in literary studies in the seventies.

^{vii} Jennifer Brice, author and Associate Professor of English at Colgate University.

^{viii} Similarly, there was an earlier passage in “A Little Burst” when Christopher was also shown to be talkative following a visit with Olive to the doctor for depression (*OK 72*) and, again, Olive remarked that this was unusual.

3. How is *A Visit From the Goon Squad* like an Elephant? – Discuss.¹

3.1 Why Elephant?

This morning as I walked to the bakery to buy bread, I was trying to think of a useful analogy for Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Like a virgin, was my first thought: no one, to my knowledge, had written a short story in the form of a PowerPoint presentation before. Then I thought, no: evoking Madonna is never a good idea.²

At the shop, I asked the assistant for a small sourdough, sliced please.³ She pulled a loaf from the shelf and disappeared into the room at the back. A sound, not unlike a pneumatic drill, shook the shop for several minutes. Those in the queue behind me waited in silence, but I knew exactly what they were thinking.⁴ The delay and the racket were *my* fault. Bread-slicing may be a service the shop offered, but it was not something you should ask for on a busy Saturday morning. If I’d wanted sliced, I should have come in yesterday.

The shop door opened. More customers came in, each bringing their own thoughts with them. Didn’t I own a bread knife? Was I too damn lazy to cut my own bread? By the time the shop assistant returned, the queue spilt out onto the pavement, and the shop was thick with other people’s thoughts.⁵

The assistant handed me my neatly sliced loaf wrapped in a clear polythene bag.

Sorry, I said as I paid her. I grabbed my change and faced the queue. Sorry, I said. I’m sure you’ve all got other things you’d rather be doing.

¹Jennifer Egan calls one of the stories in *Goon Squad* a ‘loving parodic homage’ to David Foster Wallace’s journalism (*Livechat*). I propose writing the creative element of this section in a similar style in terms of the lengthy tangential and yet relevant footnotes. These can easily be distinguished from the more conventional endnotes.

²I typed this but didn’t know why. So I googled ‘Egan and Madonna’ and guess what? I found an article Egan wrote about Madonna for “GQ magazine”. Serendipity? Or the ubiquity of Madonna? More likely I’d seen the article before and remembered it, even though I consciously had no recollection of it whatsoever.

³Is it of significance that the bread was sliced? Is it a reference to the saying ‘best thing since sliced bread?’ Does the loaf stand for the whole: a slice for one of the parts? (I do hope she’s not going to push this analogy too far: you know what she can be like. If she’s not reined in, we’ll be up to our eyes in ‘crusts’ and ‘crumbs’.)

⁴When it comes to most interactions with people, unless they tell us, we don’t know what they are thinking. Even then, they may not be telling the truth. Only fiction has the ability to render an approximation of interiority. See “Conclusion” for quotation from E.M. Forster and further discussion on fiction and interiority.

⁵Little known fact of the day: thoughts are porous and take on the smells of their environment. In a bakery they tend to smell of yeast.

No one responded and I felt myself blush, uncertain as to whether I'd actually spoken the words out aloud or been using my 'inside head' voice. I took the loaf back to my flat via the snickets that are so much a part of Whitstable's geography.⁶ As I opened the latch on my back gate, it suddenly came to me, 'Elephant!'⁷

*

(a) The Who's Who of *Goon Squad*

Formed of thirteen stories, *Goon Squad* opens with "Found Objects" which features Sasha, a kleptomaniac, who lifts a purse in the bathroom of a hotel whilst out on a first date with Alex. Sasha mentions her former boss, Bennie Salazar, 'who sprinkled gold flakes into his coffee – as an aphrodisiac, she suspected – and sprayed pesticide in his armpits' (GS 5). The next story, "The Gold Cure", centres on Bennie, the founder of Sow's Ear record label, as he visits one of his bands. In that story, Sasha is 'seen' in the context of being Bennie's assistant towards whom he has sexually ambivalent feelings.

And so, we meet the occupants of the first two cars of this roller-coaster of a book.⁸ The others are invited along for the ride because of a connection to Bennie or Sasha. In his youth, Bennie was the founder and bass player of the Flaming Dildos and many of the other protagonists have a relationship to the band. Scotty played guitar; Rhea and Jocelyn were friends who wrote the lyrics; Lou, is an older man who Jocelyn once dated. Lou gets a brief mention in "The Gold Cure" in the context of having been Bennie's mentor; we also see him as a father in "Safari", which is focalised through his daughter, Charlie and his student girlfriend, Mindy; and on his death bed in "You (Plural)", through the eyes of a now-grown-up-but-still-fucked-up-by-her-affair-with-Lou Jocelyn.

⁶ According to those in the know, God and/or the Devil – if you believe in him/her/them – reside(s) in the detail: Why the snickets? Are they suggestive of a maze? Is she pointing towards the notion of puzzle? Or does it signify approaching somewhere by an indirect route?

⁷ Elephant as metaphor is not without precedent: there's the elephant in the room; the writing of a novel, or for that matter a PhD, has been likened to trying to eat one (Maxwell qtd. in Mewburn). In both instances, the elephant's size is critical to the comparison. But why Egan and elephant?

⁸ Roller-coaster is an apt metaphor for there is something carnivalesque about this book. If I were a different type of student and this were a different type of essay, Bakhtin and his concepts of carnival and polyphony might be a good critical prism through which to explore this text.

In the process of writing “The Gold Cure”, Egan became curious about Bennie’s ex-wife, Stephanie, and “A to B” is largely focalised through her (*Livechat*). Jules Jones the reporter of “Forty Minute Lunch” is Stephanie’s older brother and Stephanie was a protégé of Dolly through whom “Selling the General” is focalised (*GS* 144).

The protagonists in the remaining stories have a connection with Sasha and are focalised through her college friend, Rob (“Out of Body”); her uncle Ted (“Goodbye, My Love”) and her daughter Alison (the PowerPoint presentation story – “Great Rock and Roll Pauses”).

The final story “Pure Language” takes us back full circle to Alex, Sasha’s date from “Found Objects”. It is set in the near future when Alex secures work with Bennie, helping him use new technologies to revive Scotty’s career. In the closing pages of the book, the two men, but Alex in particular, reminisce about Sasha’s apartment when they make a half-hearted attempt to find her:

Alex looked up at the building, sooty against the lavender sky, and experienced a hot-cold flash of recognition, a shiver of *déjà vu*, as if he were returning to a place that no longer existed (335).

They ring the bell and Alex remembers the past:

he saw himself arriving at a small, cloistered apartment – purples, greens – humid with a smell of steam heat and scented candles. A radiator hiss. Little things on the windowsills. A bathtub in the kitchen – yes, she’d had one of those! (335).

He imagines himself: ‘walking into her apartment and finding himself still there – his young self, full of schemes and high standards, with nothing decided yet. The fantasy imbued him with careening hope’ (335).

No one answers. Sasha, as the reader knows from “Great Rock and Roll Pauses”, is long gone and enjoying a happy family life elsewhere.

(b) Influences and Epigraphs

Egan names two of the main influences for *Goon Squad* as Proust and the long-running HBO television series *The Sopranos*, thus combining high and popular culture as befits a writer who says, ‘theory-lust still guides me as a fiction writer. There’s usually a theory or two hidden (possibly not well enough) in my books’

(Cox). Her debt to Proust is explicit from the epigraphs to *Goon Squad* which are both from *In Search of Lost Time*⁹.

The episode described above where Alex remembers the apartment where he had spent time with Sasha could have been written specifically to illustrate the idea expressed in the first part of the first epigraph:

Poets claim that we recapture for a moment the self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth. But these are most hazardous pilgrimages, which end as often in disappointment as in success. *It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years* (Italics my own).

However, despite this and notwithstanding Egan's writing process – 'place is probably the single most important entry point for me into fiction' (*TV BookClub*) – the evocation of memory through place is not a major theme of the book. Rather, it is the last sentence of the epigraph (as italicised) that is key to Egan's stated project. Asked about the first epigraph, she says:

I don't believe that we are different people at different times. A continuity exists even though it may feel like we are different people over the course of time. The passage of time has such a radical effect on all of us—the experience of time passing, the discoveries and tragedies of life ... To some degree, experience is everything: what happens to you ends up being your life. On the other hand, there are things about us that are clear from the beginning ... And much of life is chance and luck. There is only so much you can do. It's a paradox (*onthejournal*).

This suggests that Egan's project is to examine the relationship between nurture and nature into adulthood (nurture being experience and nature being character, as in childhood), using the composite novel form to explore the events and interactions of

⁹ This is the book which Genette analyses in *Narrative Discourse* under the name of its English translation *Remembrance of Things Past*. Is this another coincidence? Egan confesses to having theory-lust (Cox). Her interest in Proust makes it likely she will have come across Genette's work.

a group of people (the Goon Squad) over an extended period of time. How people respond to what life throws at them depends largely, according to Egan, on character: it is through seeing how the characters respond to ‘the discoveries and tragedies of life’ that they are *revealed*.

The second epigraph reads:

The unknown element of the lives of other people is like that of nature, which each fresh scientific discovery merely reduces but does not abolish.

This is quite a different prospect from the unknown element of *unknown* people, which would, at least initially, appear to be another key aspect of Egan’s project.

She says:

Goon Squad is literally all about the complexity of peripheral characters. That’s the whole logic that moves the book forward. You catch someone out of the corner of your eye, and then you’re plunged into the middle of their inner life. If that’s not a testament to the complexity of peripheral characters, I don’t know what would be. That’s the whole question the book is built around (*onethejournal*).

As described above, the characters in *Goon Squad* have more than a peripheral connection to one another. Egan must therefore mean that it is the reader who glimpses a character in one story and is plunged into that character’s world in another. (Indeed Egan’s formulation as between the characters themselves is more applicable to *Olive* in which Olive Kitteridge is glimpsed or mentioned in passing by peripheral characters).

The Sopranos – the long-running, now completed, HBO television series – was another major influence on *Goon Squad*. This is particularly interesting given Egan’s ambition to write a big sprawl of a novel. There has recently been discussion about whether series, such as *The Sopranos* (or indeed *The Wire*) are today’s cultural equivalent of the big novel. ‘Has the novel been murdered by the mob?’ asks John Freeman; and Jonathan Bowers compares *The Sopranos* with Dostoevsky (whose novels were serialised in the Russian newspapers) and with Tolstoy. He also claims

that the experience of watching it can be akin to reading the ‘next Great American Novel’.

At eighty-six episodes, *The Sopranos* replicates one of the attributes of *In Search of Lost Time* that Egan believed a modern readership would not stomach: ‘I mean, it’s so long, significant actual time passes as you read it. All of that is interesting to me, but I believed there would be no way to replicate that now’ (*onethejournal*).

She is right. Slouching on the sofa watching TV with a drink in one hand and a snack in the other – which is how I watched all eighty-six episodes – is quite a different prospect from hours spent poring over Proust. But it is not just size that matters here. The episodic form, immersing its audience in one character’s life one week and having them play a minor role the next, is an evident influence on *Goon Squad*. The impact on the viewer/reader shares similarities too. Seeing the world through someone’s point of view creates empathy. It also gives us access to factual information about the character that other people on screen may not know. For example, in *The Sopranos*, we know about Carmela’s infatuation with Furio: Tony does not. We know what Tony would do if he found out and there is a pleasure in that.

The Sopranos also undermines our stereotypical expectations of the characters. Most notably, Tony Soprano is in therapy which is not what you would expect from a mafia boss. He is also fond of ducks. Egan says, ‘The minute anything about a person has been established, my immediate question is, *how do I undermine it?* People are complicated, and often what first seems clear about them ends up being contradicted. That’s how I think about characterization’ (*onethejournal*).

Against the background of Egan’s ‘lit crit years’ which had given her an ‘interest in playing with form’ (Cox), she posed a question:

I was reading Proust in my forties, and I thought, how would you write a book today about time? ... My question was, how could you suggest that great big sprawl of a nineteenth-century novel or early twentieth-century novel like Proust, and yet not have to create all that sprawl? How can you find a way to evoke it, without having to writing (sic) it all out? (*onethejournal*)

She answered the question for herself by writing *Goon Squad* in the form of a composite novel.

In the remainder of this chapter I look at how Egan exploits the form to create the impression of sprawl. “The Shape of an Elephant” examines how Egan organises her chronology; and “An Elephant Never Forgets” considers Egan’s portrayal of the lives of the many characters shaped by those experiences and how the gaps in the text encourage readers to engage with it.

3.2 The Shape of an Elephant

Indulge me here. Say a short story collection is like being presented with random parts of various different animals, and a composite novel is being given animal parts – in a polythene bag if you like – and being told that they are *all* the constituent parts of an elephant, how does that affect your attitude towards what you’ve been given?¹⁰

I’d suggest that, in the first case, you wouldn’t attempt to connect the various bits and pieces as you’d assume it to be pointless. However, in the latter case, you are far more likely to immediately begin trying to figure out how each part relates to the others. Is this an ear? (It’s enormous!) What’s happened to the other ear? Is this part of the trunk, or a bit of the tail? The gaps and the connections matter. Indeed, but for the notion of the imaginary/virtual whole, the gaps and connections *would not exist*. It’s like a magician’s conjuring trick. Call a book one thing and there are gaps; call it another and the gaps disappear. Now you see them: now you don’t.

*

The time of narration of the thirteen stories in *Goon Squad* jumps back and forth in a seemingly chaotic manner: sometimes, the stories leap far into the future and there

¹⁰ Note that the way the question is framed points towards reader-reception theories: the reader is being directly addressed and ‘your’ attitude i.e. that of the reader is the focus of interest. Also the premise of this analogy is the opposite of the premise of the dissection metaphor used on *Olive* above. With *Olive*, the Text is seen as the whole body and the chronologically reconstructed version the result of brutal dissection: with *Goon Squad* and the Elephant analogy, the opposite is the case i.e. the Text is thought of as the bits and pieces; the Chronological reconstruction – the overarching narrative – as the whole, healed, Elephant. This is in keeping with Egan wanting to suggest that ‘great big sprawl’ which is the elephant. And it answers the question: Why Elephant? It’s big. Size matters here.

are long and significant gaps in what the reader is told about the overall narrative arcs of the lives of the main protagonists.

Once again it is Genette who provides the vocabulary to analyse and articulate such strategies with terms, such as *ellipsis* for a temporal gap; *analepsis* for a leap backwards in time (flashback); and *prolepsis* for a leap forward in time (flash forward) (*Narrative Discourse*, ch.1). These techniques are also used in the short story and the novel but the composite novel form gives Egan greater leeway to manipulate her chronology and vary the who and the how of her character portrayal.

Ali Smith was shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2001 for *Hotel World* and again in 2005 for *The Accidental*. Both novels are written in parts – although they are not, strictly speaking, composite novels as the stories that comprise them are not autonomous. Smith has also written several short story collections and is well qualified to discuss both forms. In answer to the question, ‘*What drives the short story form*’ Smith replies:

The form is exciting because you can do anything with it. In a finite space, you can do the infinite... With a novel you are much more constrained because it has to be chronological to some extent. It has to be about time. Short stories are about time, but they are about spatiality, something moving out or away from us as a still point. A novel has to be about sequence because it has to move at length from one thing to another. Short stories do that too but within the form you can go any direction and the form will hold it. It’s like a mythical beast that can change at any time but you know it will always hold the shape. (*Brand*)

Smith’s statement on how the novel and the short story respectively deal with time is worth considering in relation to the hybrid form. Is it possible to have the best of both worlds?

Egan, who has written three novels in the conventional form (*The Invisible Circus*, *The Keep* and *Look at Me*) wrote *Goon Squad* as a composite novel (or entangled stories – as she prefers to call them¹¹). *Goon Squad* is most decidedly not chronological and, it would seem that she chose the form to be free from the constraints of a novel. She decided that her overarching narrative would not be

¹¹ At the Short Story Event at Freeword on the 18th October 2011, the short story writer Claire Wigfall said she had spoken to Jennifer Egan who called *Goon Squad* ‘entangled’ short stories, however the publishers were very clear they did not want that on the cover of the book!

driven by the question what happens next? ‘I tell people exactly what will happen. I leap into the future sometimes...’ (*onethejournal*).¹²

Telling the reader what happens means that the reader will not necessarily understand the significance of the information until a later point in the book. For example, in the first story “Found Objects”, Alex sees ‘a picture of Rob, Sasha’s friend who had drowned in college’ (*GS* 14) even though the story which deals with the ‘drowning’ incident – “Out of Body” – comes much later and leaves it open at the end as to whether or not Rob survives.¹³ Similarly, in “The Gold Cure”, we learn that ‘Lou had died three months ago, after being paralyzed from a stroke’ (*GS* 37) and that Bennie received circular burns on his forearm at a party engineered by Stephanie’s former boss (*GS* 22) even though we are yet to encounter the story with Lou on his deathbed being visited by Rhea and Jocelyn – “You (Plural)” – or know anything of La Doll’s disastrous New Year’s Eve party which is explained in “Selling the General”.

In this way Egan forces the reader to engage in what Wolfgang Iser describes as an ‘active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection’ in order to make sense of the information provided in each story as it relates to the book’s overarching narrative (282).

Leaping into the future, that is, using prolepses is another unusual technique employed by Egan. This gives the book a feeling of nervous anxiety in keeping with many of the characters and storylines. She also uses analepses (flashbacks) which are far more common in fiction and, apart from Bennie’s shame memories in “The Gold Cure”, tend to have a more relaxed feel, as though the narrator has the luxury of time to indulge in looking back at the past.

Egan initially thought that the question driving the macro plot might be, ‘what was it like before?’ But when she wrote the book with a backwards chronology she

¹² It is of course Egan’s narrator and not Egan who leaps into the future sometimes: this is an issue that Genette’s work and terminology set out in the previous chapter on *Olive* helps identify, and something I explore more critically in the chapter below on *Legend* where – given the strong autobiographical element – the blurring becomes more problematic.

¹³ It is an incident that is revisited in “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” when Alison details both her mother and father’s feelings about Rob and we learn that Drew decided to become a doctor because he had been unable to save Rob.

says that it felt really flat (*Livechat*). The final text is Janus-like, looking back and leaping forward, as both Egan's modes of construction contribute to the sense of temporal sprawl she sought to achieve.

The verve and vivacity of a book can be lost in its critical consideration. With this particular text it is essential that we do not grow insensate to the rumble and screech of the roller-coaster's wheels or to the delighted and fearful yells of its occupants as we negotiate the ups and downs of the ride. In places, the book is laugh-out-aloud funny. At the same time there is an underlying sense of tragedy: a general who has committed genocide is made to wear a fuzzy teal blue hat with ear flaps (*GS* 137); a bloated has-been rock star plans a come-back tour so strenuous that he will die (*GS* 129); a journalist attempts rape during a celebrity interview (*GS* 178-179); Rolph, who we have seen as a delightful little boy, kills himself (*GS* 82); Rob drowns. There are also quiet, intimate tragedies: Noreen will never be accepted by her neighbours and is having some sort of a breakdown amongst the flowerbeds (*GS* 118,136); Drew's young patient dies (*GS* 289); and Ted folds up his desire for his wife in a passage that is heart-breaking (*GS* 207). Written in a variety of markedly different styles and, broadly organised around the music business and the effects of technology and media manipulation, *Goon Squad* critiques American life over several decades with a sharp, knowing intelligence that is always engaging and vibrant.

Now, I will put my fingers in my ears and block out the sounds of the Goon Squad on the roller-coaster and focus on two stories – “Safari” and “Goodbye My Love” – to examine the techniques used by Egan:

a) **Safari**

When internally focalised, “Safari” is focalised through Lou's daughter Charlie and his student girlfriend Mindy which underlines the fact that they are not so very far apart in age. (Lou's penchant for younger women was established in the previous story “Ask Me if I Care” in which he has an affair with Jocelyn who is a teenager.)

In “Safari” there is a scene where Charlie and her party are entertained by a group of Samburu warriors. We are told that, thirty-five years later, one of them – a peripheral character and nineteen at the time of narration – will be dead but will have sixty-three grandchildren, one of whom will be called Joe and will marry Lulu

(GS 61-62). Lulu is Dolly's daughter in "Selling the General" and Bennie's assistant in "Pure Language".

"Safari"'s narrator also tells of a time in the future when some of the characters reconnect through Google and Facebook which results in two minor characters, Dean and Louise, getting married (once again underlining the point that peripheral characters have whole lives of their own): 'But this outcome will be the stark exception – mostly, the reunions will lead to a mutual discovery that having been on safari thirty-five years before doesn't qualify as having much in common, and they'll part ways wondering what, exactly, they'd hoped for' (GS 71).

This speaks to Egan's interest in how people connect and her distrust as to whether social media can achieve this in any meaningful way.

"Safari" ends with the narrator leaping forward from the time of narration when Rolph is eleven, to 'long after Rolph has shot himself in the head at the age of twenty-eight'. By that time, the narrator tells us – 'tell' being the operative word here, as opposed to 'show' – Charlie (Rolph's sister) has reverted to her birth name of Charlene, has been to law school and has a son of her own who she wants to call Rolph but only does so privately to spare her parents' feelings (GS 82 -83). The narrator, internally focalised through Charlene, will 'stand with her mother among a crowd of cheering parents beside a field, watching him play, a dreamy look on his face as he glances at the sky' (GS 83).

Thus, in "Safari" there is a strong suggestion that, not only do all the peripheral characters have lives as full and complete as the protagonists, but also that everyone has a future – whether that ends in death, as with Rolph; or in progeny who will presumably go on to have their own full lives and be dreamy or not. This contributes to a sense of sprawl both in terms of time and human experience.

b) Goodbye, My Love

In "Goodbye, My Love," Egan renders the sprawl of time through both analepses and prolepses. I focus on how the story renders moments of Sasha's life, but it would be a disservice to this very fine story not to say something about how it also 'plunges us into the middle of the inner life' of Sasha's Uncle Ted. When internally focalised, the story is told through Ted's eyes and portrays a man disappointed in middle age because of his failure to honour his passions. His acknowledgment of his culpability in the demise of his marriage to Susan is particularly poignant (GS 207).

This thread is told in parallel with the Greek myth of “Orpheus and Eurydice” and Ted’s love of art. Both give the story an additional resonance and speak to the ways in which what is most precious to a person can be destroyed in a moment of carelessness (Orpheus), or in the insidious accumulation of moment after moment of neglect (Ted – of his love of Art and of his wife Susan). These themes are underlined by the title of the story. Ted’s journey to the back streets of Naples can also be read as a visit to the underworld in an attempt to bring Sasha back.

In relation to Sasha’s timeline: taking the book as a whole, “Found Objects” opens the book with Sasha aged thirty-five (that number again) when we see her steal a purse in a hotel bathroom. “Out of Body” takes us back to Sasha’s college days – an analepsis in the context of the whole book.

“Goodbye, My Love” takes us back even further in time. Sasha is nineteen and missing at the time of narration of the story. The narrative centres on a trip her Uncle Ted takes to Naples in order to try and find her. It fills us in on what happened to her since she left home at seventeen (*GS* 220) and includes an analepsis back to when she is only five years old and experiences the violent break-up of her parents’ marriage (*GS* 215-217). The story ends with a proleptic leap twenty years into the future:

after Sasha had gone to college and settled in New York; after she’d reconnected on Facebook with her college boyfriend and married late (when Beth had nearly given up hope) and had two children, one of whom was slightly autistic; when she was like anyone, with a life that worried and electrified and overwhelmed her, Ted, long divorced – a grandfather – would visit Sasha at home in the California desert’ (*GS* 229-230).

(Note, once again, the reference to Facebook). Although I can admire the above as a sentence and a summary, to this reader, it jars as its sole purpose appears to be to link this story with the one that follows which is in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. It is impossible for me to now know whether this sentence jarred with me on first reading. As Iser says:

when we have finished the text, and read it again, clearly our extra knowledge will result in a different time sequence; we shall tend to establish connections by referring to our awareness of what is to come, and so certain aspects of the text

will assume a significance we did not attach to them on first reading, while others will recede into the background (281).

Perhaps it is because “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” is so different – not only to the other stories in the book, but also to anything else the reader may have *ever* encountered – that Egan included the offending sentence to help orientate the reader.

Be that as it may, “Goodbye, My Love” depicts moments of Sasha’s life between the ages of five and thirty-nine. Egan’s technique is to daub bright splodges of colour across a character’s time-line: perhaps somewhat more economically than one would find in a conventional novel, thus applying a short story approach to time (as per Ali Smith’s view) onto the broader canvas of the novel. The economy and compression so often found in a good short story are also brought to bear here, as should be evident from the analysis of Ted’s story above.

c) Gaps I - Temporal

Between the splodges there is the blank canvas, the gaps if you will. A gap in a narrative can be purely temporal, that is, nothing of relevance to the story takes place during that time; or it can be in respect of a period of time in which something of significance does happen, but that something is omitted from the narrative. In the latter case the reader may try to fill in the gap as I am about to do here.

For Sasha to have had two children by the age of thirty-nine (that is, twenty years after the time of narration of *Goodbye My Love* when she was nineteen) she would have needed to have reunited with Drew fairly soon after *Found Objects* given that she is thirty-five at the time of narration of that story – particularly as she and Drew also spent time in Pakistan before settling down (*GS* 252). However, this is not impossible as her children are so close in age and the couple could well have decided to start a family very soon after reuniting.

Iser says:

A literary text must ... engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. In this process of creativity, the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play (275).

With the composite novel, boredom is the greater of these two evils, as there seems to be a greater tolerance of matters, even of a significant nature, to remain unresolved. This is further addressed in relation to Egan's characters in *Gaps II* below.

Music is another significant influence on the book. Egan says of Proust, 'He uses music both as a subject and as an organizing theme ... I sensed that music would have to be an important part of this work; time and music are so intertwined' (*onethejournal*). As well as the characters and storylines in the book being broadly organised around the music industry, Egan tackles the notion of a gap or a pause in music head on in "Great Rock and Roll Pauses", the story written in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. Both content and form demonstrate Egan's interest in the significance of the pause and its fictional representation. She gives a talk about the story, using PowerPoint herself to illustrate it, and explains, 'slides let me represent absence in a vivid way. This chapter "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" is all about absence, the gaps in rock and roll songs and in life and bring to mind briefly the biggest pauses which are of course endings' (6:17 iTunes).

She ends her talk by saying, 'in traditional fiction I could write "there was a pause" but there is no actual pause in that transaction. I could write "no one said anything" but in fact something is still being said. In a slide I can do this ...' (iTunes). Egan proceeds to show a blank slide for several seconds before thanking her audience.

See. That's weird isn't it? And most definitely inappropriate in the middle of a PhD thesis.

Egan's background in literary theory informs her fascination with the capacity of language to represent the passage of time which she explores through her manipulation of chronology in *Goon Squad*: this is facilitated by the composite novel form. The effect of the variety of styles also contributes to a sense of sprawl. Iser explains such a technique, 'It is the very abundance of perspectives that conveys the abundance of the world under observation (226).' The PowerPoint presentation is the most radical of the styles employed in *Goon Squad*, although "Forty-Minute Lunch" is also very unusual, in the style of a celebrity magazine with numerous hilarious footnotes: these innovations are testament to Egan's playfulness and desire to test the limits of narrative.

3.3 An Elephant Never Forgets

The reputation of elephants for not forgetting is scientifically proven. There is evidence that elephants, particularly matriarchs, have long, reliable memories. They need them to survive. The ability to recall numerous routes across vast tracts of land that have, in the distant past, led to food can be a matter of life or death. On those journeys they also need to remember who is friend and who is foe so they can gather the herd together for protection when encountering potential dangers.^{ix}

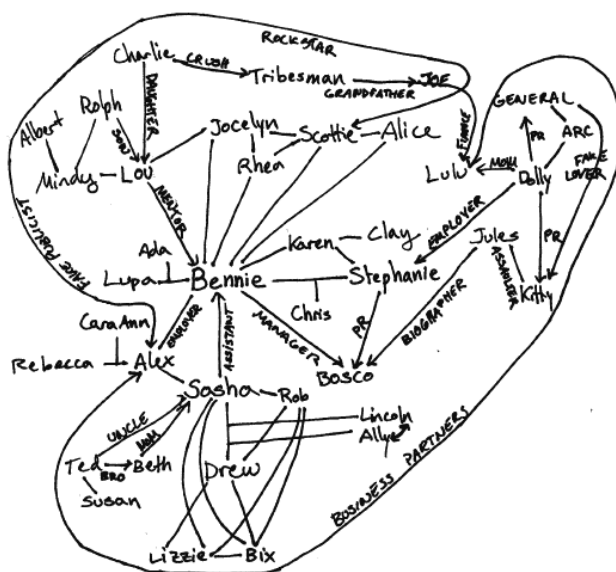
As well as this, we have the video footage on YouTube of Shirley the Elephant Parts 1 and 2.^x It shows the reunion of two elephants named Shirley and Jenny who had been separated for decades – having been in a circus in America together twenty-five years previously when Jenny was an infant. They are so pleased to see one another that, overnight, they bend the thick metal bars separating them.

Why is this so poignant? Shirley's tragic backstory – she was on a boat that caught fire and sank; she was attacked by another elephant and suffered permanent damage to one leg; she looks fairly ropery with a torn ear and areas of discolouration – evokes our sympathies. But there's also something unnerving about these huge, hulking animals remembering one

another so passionately and for so long. Does it threaten man’s assumption that we are the superior species? Does it instil feelings of guilt at the way we enslave and eat other species? Does it erode our fundamental belief in their ‘otherness’ which underpins our justification of our treatment of them?

As moving to me as the animals in these videos is Shirley’s African American keeper, Solomon, who is shown coaxing her – with both carrot and stick, OK not stick but with a winch attached to a chain attached around her leg – onto a lorry for the fourteen hour journey to her new home. He is tearful when he bathes her for the last time and speaks in a strong Southern accent saying he’s happy that she’ll never have to wear a chain again. It wasn’t so long ago that skin colour was considered a sufficient marker of otherness justifying slavery and inhuman treatment. But the video doesn’t say this. It’s what I saw in the gaps and from the juxtaposition of the material presented.

Goon Squad presents a puzzle and some of Egan’s readers have risen to the challenge of trying to solve it. They have engaged passionately and creatively with the question of how the characters are connected to one another. Demonstrating Iser’s point that the gaps in the text force readers to engage in an ‘active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection,’ one of Egan’s fans, Emily Heist Moss, represented the various relationships diagrammatically on her blog (Iser 282; *Rosie Says*):



The diagrammatic representation demonstrates that Egan term ‘entangled stories’ is an appropriate one for the relationships in *Goon Squad*. Egan responded to the diagram by posting: ‘Boy, do I love this. Thanks for engaging so deeply with GOON SQUAD; I’m honored’.

Another respondent pointed out that there should also be a link between Stephanie and Jules which must be right as they are siblings (*Rosie Says*).

Filip Zembowicz produced a more high-tech, interactive character map which enables users to see how the character connections develop in relation to the page number. Given my work on the chronology, this was of particular interest to me, although his mapping misses many of the connections identified by Moss.

Nick Douglas also produced what he describes as an ‘org chart’ for the book. (I love it that this one warns of ‘spoilers’). Egan posts a link to this one on her Facebook page and later comments that a number of Sasha’s connections have been missed (Facebook). Finally, by way of examples (as there are many more) a Dutch fan, Marie Anne Rimmelink, uploaded on YouTube a diagram of the characters’ connections filmed at fast speed.

As interesting to me as the evident and enthusiastic engagement of her fans, is Egan’s knowledge of these projects and her response to them. Such a personal and geographically wide interaction between reader and author is only possible because of recent technological developments. This is particularly interesting considering that one of the questions implicitly posed by *Goon Squad* is whether technology is a help or a hindrance to our ability to connect and communicate. (Egan, herself, has a Facebook page, a website and a Twitter account. *Goon Squad* is available as an iTunes app, and *Black Box* (see below) was first published via Twitter.)

In 2003, Egan wrote a non-fiction article called “Love in the Time of No Time” exploring the internet dating scene. In the opening paragraph, she says, ‘To lock eyes with a stranger is to feel the gulf between proximity and familiarity and to wish – at least sometimes, briefly, most of us – that we could jump the hedges of our own narrow lives and find those people again when they drift out of sight’ (*New York Times*). She goes on to suggest that internet dating ‘speaks to the fervency of that wish’. It is a wish she explores in *Goon Squad*; and one whose ‘fervency’ is amply demonstrated by the bending of iron bars by Shirley and Jenny, the elephants.

GAPS II – Character

On a macro-level, *Goon Squad* is presented like a vinyl record with a side A and a side B; with the stories as the individual tracks. In “X’s and O’s”, the story that ends ‘side’ A, Scotty is the first person narrator and pays a visit to Bennie in his swanky office. He says, “I came for this reason: I want to know what happened between A and B... A is when we were both in the band, chasing the same girl, B is now” (GS 101).

In the story that starts ‘side’ B, called *A to B*, the question is repeated – this time it is Bosco who asks, ‘how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?’ (GS 127).

Egan has more recently published *Black Box* a short sequel to *Goon Squad* which features Lulu (who is mentioned in the context of “Safari” above) as a spy in 2030. The story was originally distributed as a series of tweets and later appeared in a Sci-Fi Edition of *The New Yorker*. Egan says of *Black Box*, ‘I’m very interested in looking at people at different points in their lives and seeing how different traits that read one way at one age play out over time’ (*New Yorker*).

This echoes Egan’s response to a question about the first epigraph quoted above. In the same interview she admits that the only reason *Goon Squad* strayed into what some perceive as Sci-Fi territory is because she wanted to ‘see’ certain characters, such as Alex, when they were older. She did not want to situate his first appearance any earlier in time, and so was left with no option but to stretch her timeline beyond the present and into the near future. In the same way, she was curious about Lulu, and wanted to explore what would become of her when she was older, which necessarily needed another foray into the future.

Seeing the characters at different points in their lives does not mean that we necessarily know how they got from the previous point to the one that follows. (How did Bosco get from A to B?) We may have bright splodges of paint on the canvas, but the splodges are not joined up.

Sasha’s overarching narrative is the most developed in *Goon Squad*, hence the focus on her in this essay so far. On the other hand, Bennie, the other main protagonist, appears with a second wife and a small child – Lupa and Ava – in the final story *Pure Language* but we have no idea how he got there. Many novels do not tie up all the loose ends but there is a general expectation that they will do so in

respect of the main protagonists. And with Bennie, it is not only his timeline that is incomplete; other basic characteristics are blank too. The reader knows that he comes from an ethnic background – from references to Bennie’s ‘swarthy’ appearance (*GS* 26); his hair (*GS* 30; 31); his ‘light brown skin’ and being a ‘cholo’ (*GS* 42); Scotty’s observation that Bennie had got more brown and that calling him Caucasian would be ‘a stretch’ (*GS* 99); and the attitude of the people in Crandale to him (*GS* 116) – but precisely what that background is remains unexplored. Egan says:

Bennie’s one of those Americans who has erased his past – there are lots of them – and I was comfortable letting him do that. The characters are a little mysterious to each other and I don’t understand them completely. My deep knowledge of them is less than it usually is about my characters. I don’t know why (Liu).

In *Goon Squad*, issues one would normally expect to be unresolved – at least initially – are already resolved (we are repeatedly told what happens next); and matters one may expect to have been resolved – at least by the end of the book – remain unresolved. This tolerance for the unresolved derives from the short story rather than the novel side of the composite novel’s parental lines, as a short story is often a glimpse into a life, or about a particular moment, without the need for a protagonist’s background to be fleshed out in the way one might expect of a protagonist in a conventional novel.

David Mitchell ^{xi}describes the how short stories suggest a bigger world:

I think all novels are actually compounded short stories. It’s just the borders get so porous and so squished up that you no longer see them but I think they are there....Short stories have a background white noise that creates the illusion that the world is much bigger than the mere 10 or 15 pages, and I wanted to see if I could sync up the white noise of the background of short stories.

Mitchell’s statement that ‘*all* novels are actually compounded short stories’ is one with which I would disagree as this would depend, in my view, on the kind of novel in question. I fully accept, however, that the statement might be true of all of *Mitchell’s* novels. (See “Analysis” for further discussion of the differences between the two forms). However, the implied suggestion that the composite novel ‘sync[s]

up the white noise of the background of short stories,' *is* persuasive. 'Synching up' is a technique used to great effect by Egan to render the 'great big sprawl' she was so keen to create as the vast canvas of *Goon Squad* is as much about what is suggested, as what, in fact, appears on the page.

^{ix} By BBC News Online's Helen Briggs 'Why Elephants Don't Forget.' Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/1285532.stm>. Web. 31. Aug. 2013

^x 'Nature (PBS) – Shirley the Elephant' *psb.org* Available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzEUayHqrRc> and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXKxgLvIS6Y&feature=relmfu> 2000. Web. 24 Aug 2012.

^{xi} Mitchell, like Ali Smith, was an author shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001 when Hensher was a judge.

The Many Faces of David Vann

LONDON 1973

My bedroom overlooks our small back garden in the suburbs of South-East London. On one side of the concrete path is a swing; its metal struts pitted with rust, a shallow scoop of earth beneath it, where the grass has long since been scuffed away: on the other side of the path, a white hydrangea and a ceanothus grow in the shade of a lilac tree, planted by my mother when we first moved here. At the bottom of the garden, marooned and useless like an arc in a desert, is my father's shed.

I spend my teenage years in that bedroom, doing homework while listening to a transistor radio and dreaming dreams of America. Cars in cartoon colours with sharp tail fins cruise up and down the garden path; boy bands in matching suits with contrasting trim shimmy amongst my mother's shrubs; and the swing area becomes a diner, all chrome and leatherette with a jukebox playing harmonies by the Beach Boys. The shed sees nothing, its one window blinded by junk.

One glorious day, America comes to town. My school friends and I have begged our parents to allow us to go and pay homage. Outside a hotel in Central London, we are holding up thin acrylic scarves screen-printed with the name of our favourite. Mine says Donny; most of them do.

'We love the Osmonds!' Clap, clap, clap-clap, clap,' we repeat again and again until the sounds are stripped of their meaning.

Any sign that *something may be happening* – a laundry service arrives to collect soiled sheets; the postman delivers a package; a florists' van pulls up and the driver passes the doorman an extravagant bouquet – and we yelp like sick puppies. We *are* sick, with longing and excitement and the hormonal excesses of pubescent girls.

At dusk, after hours of waiting, our curfew fast approaching, Donny appears at a window. Oddly, although I didn't think it at the time, he's wearing pyjamas. They are striped in red, white and blue.

His appearance is met with a high-pitched wall of sound. The window is opened and he waves at us. We shout out his name and tell him that we love him and that we will love him forever. He blows kisses and smiles. Three floors below him, we are dazzled by his perfect, white, American teeth.

I'm jostled from behind. Two men from St. John's Ambulance Brigade push their way through the crowd carrying a stretcher and muttering, 'Make way, my loves.'

Above us, a hand emerges from a dark jacket sleeve and points towards the front of the hotel where a metal barrier has collapsed. Girls are still screaming, but the sound is no longer one of adulation. Donny withdraws from the window and the sleeve slides it closed.

For several minutes we watch and wait: America now a blank pane of glass; deaf to our shouts and blind to the frantic waving of scarves. The sleeve pulls the curtain across.

America is in retreat.

*

4.1 The Perpetual Frustration of David Vann

The Greek myth of Tantalus – from which the word, *tantalise* derives – describes his punishment of being made to stand in a pool of water under the branches of a fruit tree: the pool and the branches recede whenever Tantalus tries to drink or eat from them leaving him in a state of perpetual frustration.

Andrew Warnes' work-in-progress 'Out of touch, tantalising objects in American Fiction' looks at things which flinch away from the gesture of reaching towards them. He identifies the horizon and, in particular, the landscape of the frontier as examples. Warnes' ideas are a useful prism through which to introduce David Vann's *Legend* as the idea of perpetual frustration resonates not only with the themes and content of the book, but also with the process of its writing and road to publication.

The book centres on a father-son relationship and has its roots in autobiography. The boy's father is a dentist (as was Vann's) who aspires to a different kind of a life in the wilderness and is perpetually frustrated by his inability to achieve this:

Though frustrated himself, he had many friends who lived the kinds of lives he imagined. One was a man named Healy who lived a hundred miles off the Parks Highway at a point between Anchorage and Fairbanks where the highway cross-sectioned nothing. No other human habitation as far as any horizon, so that on a cool

summer evening when the ranges far off, their snow gone violet near midnight, seemed to float up out of the tundra as if out of oceans and the ground everywhere lost its solidity, its particularity, in my father Healy vanished, became him, and he knew freedom (*LoS* 203-204).

The narrator imagining his father becoming Healy is, in itself, worth quoting as the act of exchanging self for other is key to the book's central plot twist. The above passage also contains a description of landscape which is another very important aspect of the book, from the opening sentence which describes the location of the boy's birth as remote, 'My mother gave birth on Adak Island, a small hunk of rock and snow far out on the Aleutian chain, at the edge of the Bering Sea' (*LoS* 1); to the final paragraphs which describe the site of the father's gravestone, 'the father is a small slab of granite planted near my mother's cottage, in a field of wild grass and ice plant by the sea' (*LoS* 227).

That the book opens with the boy's birth and ends with the father's death, gives it an overall shape and sense of cohesion despite its fractured content, as does the powerful sense of place which suffuses it. Vann acknowledges the influence of Cormac McCarthy on his writing of the central novella and the central role of landscape to his project:

the extension of the literal landscape, is what McCarthy learned from Faulkner, and this is what ... I hoped for when I put *Blood Meridian* down and ... was writing "Sukkwon Island", the novella at the centre of my story collection *Legend of a Suicide*, and I was trying to write it through landscape – my native southeast Alaska, rainforest and abandoned islands. I knew I was no Cormac McCarthy, but he is the writer all American writers have to measure themselves against (*Guardian*, "American Inferno").

In *Legend*, the father looks to the North and Alaska in his pursuit of the isolation and the freedom he believes that will bring. In American culture, we are more familiar with a frontier sited in the West or, more recently, with writers, such as McCarthy, to the South and the Mexican border. The quest, however, is a familiar one, regardless of the direction in which it lies: notions of masculinity tested against the hardships and deprivations wrought by the extreme conditions of the chosen landscape. The father is frustrated in this quest.

The boy is also frustrated. He craves his father's love and attention but his father is far too wrapped up in himself to be aware of, let alone meet, the boy's emotional needs. He is barely able to meet the boy's physical needs and, in "Sukkwan Island", he neglects them with catastrophic consequences.

There is also a restless libidinous dissatisfaction in the father who leaves his first wife, the boy's mother, by being unfaithful to her and then goes on to behave in the same way towards his second wife, the boy's stepmother. In "Sukkwan Island" he is trying, unsuccessfully, to win the stepmother back. She plays a significant role in the book and is fictionalised as Rhoda in the story of the same name.

In that story, there is an erotic element to the relationship between Rhoda and the boy when they play the piano together and he spends the next week looking forward to it happening again (*LoS* 16-17); and also when the boy watches Rhoda and she is aware of it:

there were small, clear drops of perspiration where Rhoda's dark hair had been pulled back from her forehead, moisture also along the top of her upper lip and along the curving lines of her neck ... If I had touched her neck, what would she have done? Pushed my hand away, laughed at me, smiled? (*LoS* 20)

The frustration in the boy is evident. Further, in "A Legend of Good Men", the boy's mother dismisses a perfectly adequate male partner, John Laine, for no good reason (*LoS* 27-28).

This is a book in which desires are perpetually thwarted: the boy is powerless to gain his father's attention, or sexual fulfilment with Rhoda, or a permanent surrogate father-figure in his mother's new partners; his parents squander what they have, either by spoiling it and wanting something else that is unobtainable (the father), or by pushing it away (the mother). All this leaves the boy in a state of perpetual frustration.

As an adult and an author, Vann has spoken extensively about the process of writing *Legend* and his long struggle to achieve a definitive understanding of his father given the many conflicting accounts he had been given.

The book's long path to publication was another source of frustration for Vann. *Legend* is a peculiar blend – or more accurately *collision* – of memoir and fiction: it is comprised of five stories that constellate around a central novella. Add to this

strange mix, the theme of suicide, explicit in the title and woven through each and every story, and the reasons why Vann struggled so hard and for so long to find an agent willing to send his manuscript out to publishers becomes clear. The book was eventually only published by the University of Massachusetts Press as part of the prize for winning the Grace Paley Prize in Short Fiction 2008. Following demand arising from a favourable review of that edition by Tom Bissell in *The New York Times*, the book finally found a mainstream publisher (Dunham).

At the book's centre there is a shocking plot twist that breaks the cycle of frustration and, while the outcome can hardly be described as satisfying for its characters, the result is a deeply rewarding, if perplexing, reading experience. I return to this in the last section of this chapter: *Zombie-Boy*.

However, in the next section – *Vann the Man* – I look at focalisation when writing in the first person, i.e. the homodiegetic narrator. In particular, I consider the potential pitfalls where there is an autobiographical element involved, and examine Vann's writing process, including the role of the subconscious and contingency in shaping the work.

4.2 Vann the Man

Even in the relatively brief paratext, a tension is revealed: Vann dedicates the book to his father, 'For my father, James Edwin Vann, 1940-1980' at the beginning of the book and includes the following quotation from Grace Paley in his acknowledgments at the end: 'Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life' (*LoS* 229).

Two Vanns are already making their presence known: the dedication is by Vann-the-bereaved-son; the quotation selected by Vann-the-author, who has written his father as a character ('real or invented') and, as such, deserving of 'the open destiny of life.' Vann was sponsored for an early writing grant by Grace Paley and Adrienne Rich while still an undergraduate at Stanford (*LoS* 229) and was aware of the dangers of writing material so close to him. Vann-the-author took control over Vann-the-bereaved-son in the editing and shaping of the book, 'During the years I worked on it, I mostly failed. I threw everything away from the first 3 or 4 years, in which there was far too much emotion ...' (Vann, Hatwell).

He fictionalised the real life events in order to transform the material in the

belief that ‘fiction can be more true to a real life than anything lived in that life ... because it’s more compressed and takes out the incidental stuff’ (Personal Interview). However, despite all this, the text still carries traces of Vann being emotionally embroiled with his material.

In a review for the *New York Times* which is largely favourable and brought Vann’s work into the mainstream as noted above, Tom Bissell observes:

A few passages nevertheless have a confession-booth, vaguely essayistic feel. In “Ketchikan,” a 30-year-old Roy returns to his Alaskan hometown and, after listing its many eccentricities, notes, “This was overwrought, but it seemed in keeping with the indulgence of this trip, with the extravagance of an attempted return to childhood.” At the story’s end, Roy tells us that “the divorce and suicide that I had let shape my life so permanently had been something else altogether, or at least not as I had imagined. And what, then, of what I had become?”

It is hard to know who, exactly, is speaking: the art or the artist? In his acknowledgments, Vann writes, a little inelegantly, that his stories are “fictional, but based on a lot that’s true.” Fifty years ago, when writers were romanticized differently, it was less problematic to imagine an author and his narrator as an essentially Siamese-twin phenomenon.

Bissell is complaining that the author’s voice (or *artist’s* to use his term) appears to have crept into this passage. I will look at the passage that Bissell complains of in close detail later in this section but will first consider some general points about the book.

All the stories that comprise *Legend* (save for the novella “Sukkwan Island”) are narrated in the first-person so there is an apparent conflation between narrator and character as both are identified by the pronoun ‘I’. Further, as *Legend* contains a strong element of memoir, there is the additional potential for the author, David Vann, to also become conflated with the narrator or the character of the boy (sometimes called Roy in the book) or indeed with both. Vann has given numerous interviews about the writing of *Legend* so we therefore also have the living, breathing man at the moment of interview, looking back and commenting on the process of creating the text of which he was the author who created the narrator who told the story depicting a character and events based on a version of himself and

events he experienced in the past. This clearly has enormous potential for confusion. (Put like this, it reminds me of the nursery rhyme about the old lady who swallowed a fly – ‘there was a male author who swallowed an “I”’; although, in this case, it would be more accurate to say that it is the pronoun “I” that swallows and subsumes all the versions of Vann and his creations mentioned above.)

Once again, Genette is helpful in providing the means to analyse and articulate the techniques used in the text although, in this case, additional tools are also necessary. Genette comments that in a ‘‘first-person’ narrative’ where the narrator is also the hero (such as the passage complained of by Bissell above):

the restricting of narrative information to the “knowledge” of the narrator *as such* - that is, to the information the hero has at that moment in the story as completed by his subsequent information, the whole remaining at the disposal of the hero-become-narrator. Only the hero at that moment in the story deserves *stricto sensu* the term “focalization”; for the hero-become-narrator, we are dealing with extradiegetic information, which only the identity of person between hero and narrator justifies us, *by extension*, in calling “focalization.” (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 77)

Extradiegetic simply means outside of the story. So, in the passage in question, the character is Roy, at the age of thirty, who is returning to Ketchikan and through whom the story is focalised. The narrator, who is telling of the trip, does not appear in the story and is privy to information and thoughts that the character Roy may not have had.

Manfred Jahn points out that a criticism of Genette is that his system forbids focalisation through a narrator (100), unless that narrator is also a character in the story (that is, a first person narrator). Even then, as Genette explains above, it is only because the narrator and the ‘hero’ happen to have the same ‘identity’ that one can speak of “‘focalization through the narrator’” (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 77). The narrator and the character are separated by time and are, as such, different entities.

Jahn explains how Mieke Bal introduced the possibility of an external or narrator-focalizer, a move welcomed by commentators (100-101). This allows for the narrator to have an emotional or ideological stance towards the events he or she narrates regardless of whether the narrator also appears as a character in the story.

Another distinction which is useful when analysing such passages from *Legend* – this time from Jahn himself – is that between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ perception:

all types of real-life perception – or *online perception* as it will be called in the following need to be complemented by their counterparts in *offline perception* – meaning the imaginary sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches that one perceives in recollection, vision, hallucination, and dream (99).

With the benefit of these additional tools, I will now examine the paragraph which contains the passage complained of by Bissell:

I am wearing a coat, I thought to myself, trying to keep the tone light. My mother would be proud. And then I was crying again, and then I was disgusted again, and then I took a step deeper into the channel, my shoes sliding over the stones. My thighs were very cold *now*. The rest was numb. I’m standing here in the water I told *himself* in an attempt to banish the feeling that perhaps the tragedies I had imagined for years, the divorce and suicide that I had let shape my life so permanently, had become something else altogether, or at least not as I had imagined. And what, then, of what I had become? (Italics my own; *LoS* 218).

There is a tell-tale ‘himself’ which I have italicised and which strongly suggests that the passage had, at some stage, been written in the third person. The ‘now’ (also italicised by me) is also confusing in the context of the passage being written in the past tense. It suggests this section may also have originally been written in the present tense. (It is arguable that both words have been included to show the character’s disorientation but, as that is not a technique used by Vann in the rest of the book, I consider it unlikely.)

We also have the ‘online’ perceptions of the character stepping into the cold water (e.g. I was crying again ... I took a step deeper into the channel); along with the character’s ‘offline’ thoughts (e.g. My mother would be proud).

What is, however, more problematic is the passage that Bissell identifies in which the character tells himself ‘in an attempt to banish the feeling ... or at least not as I had imagined.’ Is it credible that the *character* would have had such a coherent conception of the feeling he was attempting ‘to banish’ at the time of stepping into the water? It seems more likely that these are the thoughts of the

narrator with the benefit of hindsight. Further, the final sentence, ‘And what, then, of what I had become?’ is equally problematic. It is hard not to agree with Bissell’s assessment that ‘it is hard to know who, exactly, is speaking’. His complaint seems to be that the character, the narrator *and the author* have all become blurred.

Bissell further suggests that the writing is ‘self-consciously therapeutic or, worse yet, self-serving.’ Vann himself seems to acknowledge this when his narrator describes the Ketchikan trip as ‘overwrought’ and ‘indulgent’ (*LoS* 200-201). We know that Vann discarded much of his early work because there was ‘far too much emotion’ (Vann, Hatwell). But, it would seem that, even the draft that Vann finally published bears traces of his emotional struggle with the material.

Vann has also published works of non-fiction allowing me consideration of how he has fictionalised material that has less emotional charge before considering his treatment of the shocking central plot twist. He charts his own personal experiences with guns in his book on the Northern Illinois University school shooter (*Last Day*). The striking image of a pane of sheet glass rippling before it shatters appears in both books.

In the non-fiction version, a thirteen-year-old David Vann shoots at a neighbour’s dog with a BB gun (a type of air gun) believing he is too far away to do any real damage. Instead he hits the sliding glass door:

The glass moved in waves. Large ripples over its entire length, become a liquid, something I had never seen, something I didn’t know was possible, then it exploded. The entire sliding door shattered into thousands of fragments (*Last Day* 9).

All that happens following the glass breaking is that the neighbours come to the house and frighten Vann. His mother, who believes Vann to be innocent, calls the police in an effort to find out the truth. In the end, he gets away with this particular incident and continues his shooting exploits. The non-fiction version lacks the power and narrative satisfaction of the fictionalised story.

In “A Legend of Good Men” the boy shoots out most of the doors and windows of the house in which he lives:

Everything was absolutely still for a moment, then the glass began to tremble. It rippled and shook its entire length, the glass bending in waves, then shattered into a billion fibers (*LoS* 33).

In this fictional version of the story, the incident is included in a narrative with pattern and shape. Shooting out all the windows and doors of your own home is more extreme than taking one pot shot at a dog and accidentally breaking a pane of glass. Afterwards, the boy sits on the front porch and waits for the police. He is pleased when John Laine, one of his mother's former boyfriends, who is a policeman, shows up, 'I waved my hand in the air. "John," I said. Here he was delivered practically to my doorstep' (*LoS* 34).

The word 'delivered' points towards the *intention* of the boy's act – there is an action and there are consequences – and the incident, as a whole, serves to demonstrate how desperately the boy longed for a father figure.

Vann is evidently less enamoured of writing memoir than he is fiction, 'Everything goes according to plan, which is disappointing, and I think readers, also, can feel whether a piece of writing has found its own life or not' (*New Yorker* Five Questions).

When I asked Vann about his decision to give the boy a sister in the novella but not in the other stories that comprise *Legend*, he replied:

I'm not writing for describing things as they were or getting all the incidental stuff in ... I'm just writing to create something that's paranoid and cohesive and meaningful and feels like it has some power to it, and it's alive and so I'm happy to do anything: I'm happy to sacrifice some family for it; I'm happy to have any kind of transformations go on, happy to leave anybody out ... And I actually think she could have been cut out of the novella ... if I were writing it now ... It was just as his homesickness, that he missed his sister and Mum, the different things he had in Santa Rosa and all that. So it helps make that more credible that there's a lot to miss (Personal Interview).

If Vann's attitude towards the sister appears ruthless, it is as nothing compared to how he is prepared to treat Roy, a matter to which we will come presently.

However, at the same time as Vann-the-author is consciously shaping his material, it is also possible for him to be unaware as to quite what he has revealed on

the page. When I interviewed him (Appendix B), he expressed surprise and delight at the ‘baton-passing’ of images that I identified:

D.V. (laughs) I had no idea. No that’s right, a lot about writing is that there’s all this pattern being in there, and is real and it’s meaningful and connects and is cohesive but not intended or known at all.

V.J. So it’s the unconscious sort of patterning it –

D.V. Yeah. The whole thing was an unconscious process writing it really (Personal Interview).

Vann also claims that it was his unconscious that produced the key moment of the central novella. Vann put himself under enormous pressure when writing “Sukkwan Island” – not only from years of struggle with the material that he had discarded, but also the physical hardship of the circumstances in which it was written. In what sounds like a scene from fiction, Vann was the captain and owner of a 48ft ketch on his first offshore voyage. The seas were rough and he was getting no more than forty-five minutes sleep at a time during which he would have nightmares of the boat running aground. With his laptop strapped to his knees with Velcro, Vann wrote the central novella over a period of some seventeen days (*Guardian* “American Inferno”; Hatwell).

Vann told me that he fictionalises his characters, not only to be able to shape the material but also to put them under pressure, ‘so you can have all of it add up and put more pressure on someone and you can see them revealed and understand that that’s actually who they were all the way along and even if something in real life never put enough pressure on them to reveal that exactly, fiction can’ (Personal Interview).

In a similar way, it was by putting himself under pressure that Vann revealed something of himself to himself when he – to use his own terminology – ‘flips things around’ (Personal Interview):

There’s a startling turn at the center of that novella, and I was shocked by it. I didn’t see it coming until partway into that sentence. But once I wrote it, I could see it was inevitable and was where I had been headed all along without knowing it (Vann, Hatwell).

The critical moment is this, ‘He [Roy] eased the hammer down with the pistol pointed away from him and then he pulled the hammer back again, raised the barrel to his head, and fired’ (*LoS* 128). Hence, Roy kills himself.

Vann admits that he struggled with knowing what should happen next, ‘After the shock, I felt despair about what I would write in the second half of the novella – I had no idea how to continue on – but I could see that what had happened was none the less perfect and inevitable and answered a deeper need’ (*New Yorker* “Five Questions”).

What Vann, in fact, does next is shift the point of view from third person focalised through Roy, to third person focalised through the father, Jim Fenn, and the characters exchange the positions they had occupied in the first half of the novella – the subject (Roy Fenn) becomes the object; the object (Jim Fenn) becomes the subject.

It is, of course, because Vann is writing about his own father that the material is so difficult for him, not least because he felt so closely associated with his father’s final act. Vann says:

What he did was small and pathetic and also terribly violent, and I felt that the shame of his final act became my own shame. Every other person in my family struggled, also, and we each had a different story about who he was and why he did it, and none of these stories matched up. There was no single account that could be believed, in other words, no smooth and consistent arc for a memoir or a novel. There was only a fragmented mess (*New Yorker* “Five Questions”).

Vann’s statement that ‘the shame of his final act became my own shame’ is illuminating when we consider how he eventually transformed the material. The form the book finally takes is the result of many years of failed attempts and the need to somehow contain and gain mastery over the ‘fragmented mess’:

The format that *Legend of a Suicide* takes reflects the meaning of the word “legend” as a series of portraits, taken from Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women*, and from the hagiographic tradition. And I loved that form, the idea that you could do a series of portraits which could be conflicting, and that together they would provide a more complete picture (*The Millions*).

Vann's debt to Chaucer is of particular interest given that *The Canterbury Tales* is considered to be a precursor of the composite novel form (see Introduction).

Also, the book is written in a variety of styles, as reported by Belinda McKeon:

the book is also, however, a series of portraits of Vann himself as a writer coming through his late teens and twenties, since each section shows the influence of a different writer and a different style. There is Marilynne Robinson's lightness of touch in *Ichthyology*, Raymond Carver's minimalism in *Rhoda*, the loaded landscapes of Faulkner and McCarthy in *Sukkwan Island*, the fabulism of García Márquez and Donald Barthelme in *The Higher Blue*. And yet the result rings true – it is not an object lesson in the derivative, but another layer in which memoir and fiction converge.

In an e-mail exchange with me, Vann confirmed that these influences were ones that he himself considered to be the case rather than McKeon's own opinion and clarified that Márquez was actually the influence for "Ketchikan" and Barthelme alone for "The Higher Blue" (Vann, *email*). And, previously, he had told me:

the kind of collisions that happen between the stories in the style and the types of stories that they are ... shows different ways of reading or understanding the event and the family history, so the last one is a bit more hopeful for instance in its tone and it's partly because it's the least realistic. It also comes closest to the actual facts – it has the place and time and everything of the actual death which the other stories don't do, so it's interesting to me that I wrote fabulism, the most unrealistic kind of style as I got closest to the actual truth of the events of exactly when and how he did it (Personal interview).

Notwithstanding Vann's perception of the different styles in which the stories are written and their influences, to my mind, at least, there is something essentially Vann-like about them all. What is, however, clear is that the separate stories that comprise *Legend* allowed Vann to experiment with different scenarios.

4.3 Zombie-boy

In all but one of the stories the father is dead or becoming dead – although the means of death varies in different segments of the book. In "Ichthyology" he shoots himself on the stern of the Osprey boat with a .44 Magnum; in "Rhoda", unusually,

he is still alive from beginning to end, although, as the time-frame of the segment is from his marriage to his second wife until a week or so afterwards, that makes sense; “A Legend of Good Men” is set after his suicide; in “Sukkwan Island” he is, at the end, thrown into the sea on the way to Mexico and drowns; in “Ketchikan” the father is long dead by suicide; and in “The Higher Blue”, the father catches fire when lighting a gas cooker.

Vann says of the process of writing *Legend*:

Suicide bereavement is a long road of shame, anger, guilt, denial, etc., but writing the book was much more than therapy. In fiction, we can take what was ugliest in our lives and transform it into something beautiful, and we can also do something very close to raising the dead (*New Yorker* “Five Questions”).

Vann kills off the boy in “Sukkwan Island”, while keeping him alive in all the other narratives; he also breathes life into the dead father (raising the dead, as per the quotation above), thus giving them both the zombie-like status of being both dead and alive. After the key moment, the boy even assumes the appearance of a Zombie from a horror movie:

His son’s body and not really his son because the head was missing. Torn and rough, red, with dark slicked hair along the edge and blood splattered everywhere (*LoS* 129).

... he grabbed Roy’s jacket and pulled him onto his lap, the stump with part of a face showing now, a jaw and cheek and one eye that had been hidden against the floor (*LoS* 130).

... he went back and dragged Roy out, still in the sleeping bag, and tried to prop him up in the other chair in the kitchen, but he wouldn’t bend right ... he wrapped Roy, then tied him to a rafter and a leg of the table and a hook that came out of the wall for hanging pots or something, and so Roy was standing there in his sleeping bag ... (*LoS* 145).

The shift in tone is striking (reminiscent of the jarring change in the Charlie Kauffman film *Adaptation* in which twins with very different sensibilities each write one half of film script) . Vann explains the preoccupation with describing the dead

body, 'I never saw my Dad's body and, for a long time, I had fantasies that maybe he wasn't really dead and I had a lot of denial, and so I think that's why the body's described in such detail' (Personal Interview).

As is stated in the section on Perpetual Frustration, the boy craves his father's love and attention. This is, for the most part, denied him, 'Occasionally, jarred for a moment, the father would realize I had a separate existence...' (*LoS* 225). It is only when Roy kills himself in "Sukkwan Island" that he finally gains his father's full and sustained attention, but only after he has paid the highest price. The problem is that, by this point, the boy is dead. All the father can try to do is honour and respect his dead body. Unfortunately, in the same way that the father is a failure at most things in the book he also fails rather spectacularly at this task. Vann discussed the general theme of his father's incompetence in interview with me (Personal Interview).

The blurb on the back of the book says, 'Finally, in *Legend of a Suicide*, Roy lays his father's ghost to rest. But not before he exacts a gruelling, exhilarating revenge.' But, in a similar vein to Bissell's question above: Who exactly is laying the father's ghost to rest? Who is exacting revenge? Surely it is not the fictional Roy of "Sukkwan Island", but David Vann the author. Vann is candid in admitting this, 'And that moment provided such a perfect and satisfying psychological revenge after all the years of carrying his suicide around. So that's why I write, for moments like that when the work comes alive and speaks on its own, forms pattern beyond what I had imagined' (Vann, Hatwell).

Sadly, it is naïve to think that the writing of *Legend* has completely lain the 'father's ghost to rest' for Vann in quite the same way that it does for the fictional Roy. His father's legacy remains. When I spoke with Vann we discussed his feelings about men, particularly older men and his struggle with these as he, himself, becomes older: 'it's a horrible thing, no one should have to go through it' (Personal Interview). And, in an article about the lack of positive male role models in his life, he admitted: 'I can't fully shake my father's legacy, though. I don't believe in my own goodness, just as he didn't believe in his goodness. My distrust of men extends to myself ... I don't really understand how it's possible to love a man' (*Guardian* "Where are all the Men...?")

Although it is important not to fall into the trap of conflating Vann with his narrator, none the less, it is worth examining the depiction of the father in the final narrative “The Higher Blue” in the light of Vann’s stated feelings about his father. The narrator’s father is described as ‘the creature’ and ‘the thing’ (*LoS* 223-227); ‘And what I had was this: a sulky thing, easily wounded, that sat at a card table in a dental smock and made promises’ (*LoS* 224).

The father was ‘other’ to the narrator. At the pivotal moment of “Sukkwān Island”, Vann, through his narrator, imaginatively takes the father’s place, in much the same way that as the father takes Healy’s place in the passage from “Ketchikan” (cited in section 4.1). In both cases, the outcome is a form of liberation.

In making this leap, Vann exchanges himself for his father. The father ceases to be ‘other’. Vann, the author, then has the ‘luxury’ of having his father die in a manner chosen by him, although not before the father has endured a hellish seventy pages confronting the consequences of his actions. Finally, though, in the last sentence of “Sukkwān Island” – ‘He knew then that Roy had loved him and that that should have been enough. He just hadn’t understood anything in time (*LoS* 199)’ – Vann has the fictional Jim realise what he wished his own father had realised in life ‘I felt my love for him should have been enough’ (*New Yorker* “LiveChat”).

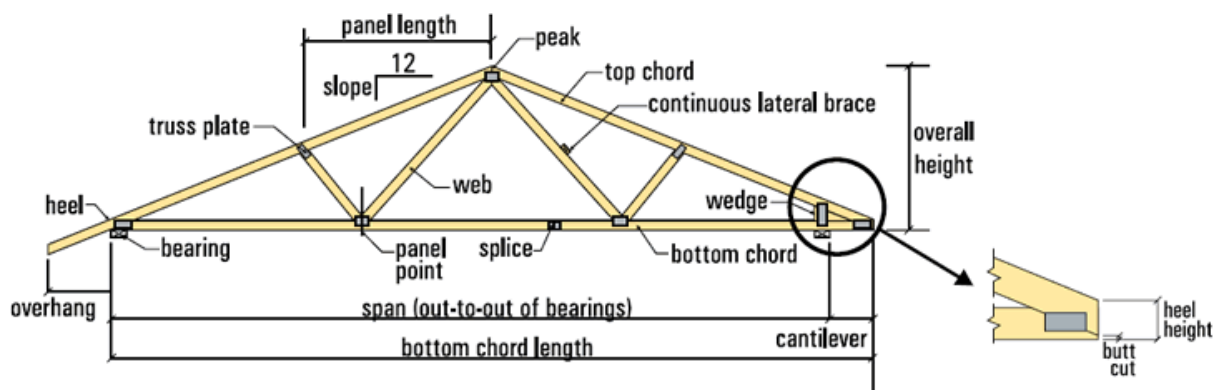
Finally, there is a sliver of redemption. For, as well as being an act of revenge, “Sukkwān Island” is also an act of forgiveness by Vann towards himself, an assuaging of the guilt he felt about not following his father into the wilderness as his father had asked of him (*New Yorker* “LiveChat”).

Nonetheless, the effect of “Sukkwān Island”, in the context of the other stories, is extremely unsettling. Logically we know it is not possible for someone to be simultaneously dead *and* alive, just as we know that it is impossible for Roy to be both an only child and have a sister called Tracy. In this way *Legend* demonstrates the capacity of the composite novel form to embrace conflict by containing opposing positions in separate stories. It does not mean that they sit comfortably together, nor do they fight to the death until one of them eventually prevails, but rather they co-exist impossibly and provocatively and in close proximity rather like one of those paradoxes:

The sentence below is true;
The sentence above is not true.

First it intrigues, then it infuriates, and then as our habitual, binary conception of *how things are* short-circuits, it momentarily stops the mind.

5. What Holds Us Together: What Keeps Us Apart



(classic truss)

In the process of renovating my house, we exposed a wooden roof truss in the middle of the loft that was to become my bedroom. The builder suggested that we move it by several feet, so that it would no longer be an obstacle between the new staircase and the room. He was a very clever chap but had a serious cannabis habit and would often turn up for work late, or not at all. When he did show, his mood swung from uncommunicative to apologetic, followed by a few hours of genius and joy. With a mug of tea in one hand and a joint in the other, ideas fountained from him like he was tapped into a pure underground source. One joint too many and he would become distracted and vague until he slowed to a standstill and could do little more than stare.

My house is the middle of a terrace of three and I was worried that, if things went wrong, both neighbours' roofs would collapse along with my own. Instead, I suggested a less risky strategy – that we remove one of the diagonals (a continuous lateral brace: see diagram above) and I would climb through the gap to access the room.

A structural engineer advised that, to execute my plan, the bottom chord would need to be strengthened. He designed a thick steel plate which was manufactured in accordance with his specifications and fixed to the beam with a staggered row of fat bolts. A small ladder was constructed for me to climb over.



The solution is far from ideal. As I move into middle-age, I wonder how much longer climbing through the truss every night to go to bed will be feasible. On the plus side, the knowledge I acquired about roof trusses influenced the structure of my composite novel *Cult*: the stories “Attraction” and “Repulsion”

function like a brace, holding the two parts of the book together while, at the same time, keeping them apart.

*

Dunn and Morris’s definition of the composite novel states that it is:

a literary work composed of shorter texts that – though individually complete and autonomous – are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles’ (2).

Strout, Egan and Vann have all given cogent and considered reasons as to why they chose the form for their books. It may not have been their plan from the outset – there is often an element of uncertainty and serendipity with writing, particularly when a project is finding its way – but by the time the books started to take shape, their authors understood that this particular form was the right vehicle for what they wanted to achieve.

Strout knew early on that she was writing ‘the Olive Stories’ as she originally called them and observes ‘form is everything in art and in literature and in telling a story ... the story is the form’ (Colgate Panel). She further explains that because Olive is so intense, seeing her react to specific events naturally led to writing the book episodically, and also that the other stories allow readers to relax, ‘between the episodes of Olive and also give ... somebody else’s point of view in the town that she lived in so ... that’s how the form came’ (Colgate Panel).

Egan followed her curiosity about her characters from one story to another, at least in the initial stages and, influenced by Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, played with organising her chronology in different ways before settling on its final form (La Force).

Finally, Vann struggled with his material for many years before finding the right form, inspired by Chaucer:

I was ... reading *The Canterbury Tales* and also all of his other works in Middle English, and I found a new structure in his *Legend of Good Women*. It was a series of portraits, and I realized that this form, the "Legendary" or "Legend," which is simply a series of portraits (borrowing from the tradition of writing about saints' lives), could work for my story (*New Yorker* "Five Questions").

Each author exploits the form in different ways and for different reasons, as highlighted in the previous chapters on the individual texts. In this section I explore the composite novel form more generally.

5.1 The Whole

Dunn and Morris expand on their definition (cited on the previous page) by fleshing out the organising principles. They suggest 'five primary interconnective elements' namely *setting*; *a single protagonist*; the *collective protagonist*; *pattern* and *storytelling* (15-16); and point out that rarely will one interconnecting element work alone:

several will act in concert, along with less controlling devices such as cross-referencing of characters and events, repetition of image and image clusters, development of common themes, and, in many cases, the arranged sequence of text-pieces (16).

The core texts are all set in very particular and very different Americas so all three have *setting* as a strong interconnective element.

Strout depicts an America that is fast disappearing:

a lot of those mills were closed and a lot more people from out-of-state are moving into state which, of course, is a point of real concern for Olive ... in an area that has remained quite the same in many ways for quite a long time in terms of who lives there is now changing (Colgate Panel).

Egan portrays an America loosely organised around the music industry where technology makes it both easy and difficult to connect with others. And *Legend* is largely set in Alaska. Inspired by Cormac McCarthy, Vann wrote “Sukkwon Island” through a landscape of abandoned islands and forests which determine the fates of the characters (*Guardian* “American Inferno”).

Each of the books also has a *single* or *collective* protagonist.

All have a *pattern* that contributes to a sense of a whole: *Olive* is largely chronological and the repetitions, which I set out at some length, contribute to weaving the text into a whole. Of her recurring characters, Strout said, ‘it was sort of like making a quilt or a tapestry ... I’ll have this strand or this colour come back here or there’ (Queens).

The quilt simile is apposite given the book’s setting and characters which reference a time and a place where such crafts would not be out of place. Indeed, Bonnie is shown braiding rugs in “Starving” (OK 81).

Goon Squad is also patterned, but ‘quilt’ would be absolutely wrong to describe its construction. Instead, Sarah Churchwell chooses an atomic metaphor which fits *Goon Squad* beautifully with its commentary on new technologies and the anxious, jumpy pace of it. Churchwell says:

the reason the book works so well is because of the continuities she [Egan] has also created: her atomised people collide, scatter and recombine in patterns that are less chaotic than they appear ... It’s a kind of meditation on the butterfly effect, in which recurrence becomes the measure of the chaos of our lives, the novel reimagined as a series of chain reactions.

As the quote suggests, the patterning is largely formed through the connections between the characters and my chapter on *Goon Squad* demonstrates how enthusiastically readers have engaged with this. Churchwell’s phrase, ‘the novel reimagined as a series of chain reactions,’ speaks to Egan’s stated strategy of giving

a peripheral character in one story, a fleshed-out life of his or her own at a different moment in time in another story.

The suggestion that the book is a ‘meditation on the butterfly effect’ is, however, less fitting given that the butterfly effect references small actions with large and surprising consequences, usually in some place distant from the initial action. The name comes from the notion of a butterfly flapping its wings contributing to a tornado on another continent. In *Goon Squad*, the recombining of characters is more bagatelle board than butterfly: a given number of balls are set into play and bump up against one another in various combinations over the course of time.

Pattern also gives *Legend* shape: the book starts with a birth and ends at a gravestone (albeit, not of the same character); and the baton-passing of images links the stories (as identified in my interview with Vann and referenced in section 4.2). Repetition of images and themes is also key to the coherence of the book. In my chapter on *Legend*, I focused on ‘perpetual frustration’ as a key theme, pervasive and inescapable to the book as the weather and the bleak landscape depicted.

Storytelling is another key organising principle. *Olive* is wholly narrated in the third person by a narrator who – when not internally focalised – is consistent in terms of tone and style. The stories that comprise *Goon Squad* are told in different styles and with varied narration. *Legend* is narrated in the first person, save for the central novella which is in the third person, the first half focalised through Roy, the second half, through Jim. Both Egan and Vann have used the word ‘collision’ to describe their books and this aspect of the latter two books more properly belongs in the *parts* rather than the *whole* section of this analysis.

The order in which the stories should be read is another factor that goes towards ‘shorter texts’ being ‘interrelated in a coherent whole’. The three authors are prescriptive about this. Strout says, ‘I thought I’m going to have to figure out what order to put these in ... I don’t want my editor to decide, I want to decide’ (Colgate Lecture) And, as the chapter on *Olive* describes, the stories are largely chronological. This results in the narrative arcs of the characters being continued, if not completed, across the stories, for example, we learn of *Olive*’s shifting attitude towards the rift in her relationship with Christopher; of Henry’s stroke, deterioration and eventual death; of Christopher’s marriage, failed marriage and remarriage; and the Jim O’Casey sub-plot that is raised in “Pharmacy” (the first story) is not resolved

until “Security” (the eleventh narrative) and therefore acts like a stitch holding the book together. Unlike Henry, for whom ‘to leave Olive was as unthinkable as sawing off his leg’ (*OK* 26), Olive says she would have been prepared to leave Henry for Jim (*OK* 213). In “Security”, Christopher accuses Olive of ‘scream[ing] at Daddy like Jim’s death was his fault’ (*OK* 230).

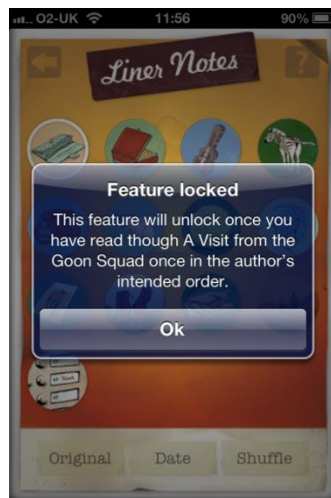
Even a relatively minor character like Daisy Foster, has a narrative arc that spans more than one story. In “Pharmacy”, Henry wants to invite Daisy and her new boyfriend – an insurance salesman who takes her dancing – over for dinner (*OK* 28). “Starving” takes place a year later and, we are updated us on Daisy Foster’s story focalised through Harmon who is having an affair with her, falls in love, and plans to leave his wife and set up home with her.

Of the three books, the chronological order of the stories in *Goon Squad* is the most radical: Egan agonised over it. She initially wrote the stories with a backwards chronology but the result felt flat. She says:

my goal was for it to ... combust in a larger way with all these different parts of the story connecting and that was not happening...I realised I was losing the opportunity for a lot of little payoffs and I ended up having to structure it – certainly not randomly, oh my God, a separate book could be written about how much time I spent thinking about what order they should be in (*Livechat*).

It is usually the case that, no matter what an author might desire or intend, a reader is free to do what he or she pleases with a book: read it backwards, start in the middle, or even, God forbid, abandon it after the first dull passage.

However, the iTunes app of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* forces you to read it in the order intended. If a reader presses the ‘date’ or ‘shuffle’ function without having first read the book in the ‘correct’ order, they receive the following message:



(iTunes)

It is both ironic and deliciously fitting that a book which is partly a commentary on how modern technologies impair our ability to communicate should use them to impose its author’s will in this way.

Vann may lack the technology in the wilderness that is his territory but, he too, is equally forceful in his intentions for *Legend*, ‘The five stories and the novella have to be read together and in that order to gain their full meaning ... Together they manage to present the full story’ (*New Yorker* “Five Questions”).

This authorial insistence on the books being read in their intended order appears to be at odds with the publication of individual stories from as stand-alone narratives. (“Sukkwan Island” won the novel prizes in France and Spain as a stand-alone novella; “Found Objects” was published in *Granta Magazine* which was this reader’s introduction to Egan; and stories from *Olive* were published more than ten years before the book was published (see section 5.2 below).) One possible interpretation is that the authors are happy for an individual story or two to be published alone but, when published together, they consider the order of the stories to be significant: the reader is, of course, free to take a different view.

And yet, a crucial component of the definition of the composite novel form is that the ‘shorter texts’ be ‘individually complete and autonomous’ and, therefore, it is only right that the stories are capable of separate publication. The apparent disconnect demonstrates one of the tensions inherent in the form.

The fact that these books are comprised of parts has other implications for their authors and, in the next section, I explore some of these.

5.2 The Parts

I no longer feel attracted to the well-made novel ... I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected moments of experience. I guess that's the way I see life. People remake themselves bit by bit and do things they don't understand. The novel has to have a coherence which I don't see any more in the lives around me.

- Alice Munro

One of the latitudes that a composite novel affords its authors is the freedom to decide which stories to include and, indeed, which to leave out. I was initially alarmed by the haphazard way in which Strout and Egan seemed to approach this task.

When Strout spoke about point of view (see section 2.3) she adopted a Colombo-like naivety.^{xii} Her explanation of how she left behind some narratives intended for *Olive* has a similar quality. She tells of how the book was overdue and she had rented a cabin in Province for the summer to finish it. Speaking about the experience and, after saying that *she* wanted to be the one to choose the order of the stories, as mentioned above, she says:

Well, there were some I accidentally left out, that I recently found ... I worked on them at different times and I thought I'm going to have to figure out what order to put these in ... I can remember the corner of the cabin that, as I got more finished, I'd stick them in a pile and they turned out to be in this order so I thought 'Wow. Look at that.' ... But there are others that weren't in that cabin. They were back in New York (Colgate Reading).

Two of the stories in which the character Olive Kitteridge is merely mentioned were published as stand-alone short stories a good decade before *Olive* was published. ("Ship in a Bottle" was published as "Running Away" in *Seventeen* in 1992 and "Criminal" was published in *South Carolina Review* in 1994 (*Olive*,

Copyright page)). I have tried, without success, to get hold of these earlier versions of the stories to see if there is any mention of Olive but, given that Strout told Robert Birnbaum that “A Little Burst” (published in *The New Yorker* in 1998) is the first “Olive” story she ever wrote, it seems unlikely (*The Morning News; Olive*, Copyright page). This strongly suggests that the earlier stories – evidently written long before the Olive book was ever considered – were ‘recycled’ and included in it.

Likewise Egan, whose author website gives the genesis of each of the stories in *Goon Squad*, says that she ‘realised’ some of the stories she had written earlier were actually about characters in the *Goon Squad*:

It was only after I’d begun writing about Bennie Salazar for GOON SQUAD, many years later, that I realized that he was the music producer from “X’s and O’s.” That character, originally named Jonah, was much flatter — as if he were missing some genetic material required to give him life... (Egan had originally written a story called XO back in 1997 when dot.coms were first exploding. The story explored people excluded from those technological developments.)

Before I began “A to B,” I’d figured out that Stephanie’s brother was the celebrity assailant from “40-Minute Lunch,” which I’d written some years earlier...

It wasn’t until after I’d finished “Selling the General” that I realized that the faded movie star originally named Pia) was of course Kitty Jackson, from “Forty-Minute Lunch...”

(All three quotations from author website)

I was initially troubled by these disclosures and began to wonder whether the composite novel form allowed authors to accidentally leave out work that belonged in the book because they had forgotten about them and, conversely, to gather old orphaned stories and ‘pass them off’ as part of a larger work? On further consideration, however, I understood that trial and error, luck and serendipity all contribute to the generation of fictional material so the seeming randomness with which some of the material was initially collated does not detract from the care and consideration the authors might have taken with its final shape.

It is, therefore, perfectly valid for the authors of the core texts to have looked at their body of work – whenever it may have been written – and, on seeing connections between various stories, decide that they properly belong together. The flipside of this process is that Strout, Egan and Vann all also discarded many stories before selecting those that would finally be included in their respective books. The composite novel form allows freedom to authors to orchestrate their work in such a way.

It also enables authors to express different and, potentially, conflicting ideas, within the confines of separate stories. Mann says of the short story cycle:

the simultaneous independence and interdependence of the stories can contribute to the cycle's ability to maintain apparently contradictory themes or philosophies. This is because the parts of the cycle remain as important as the book's overall effect, unlike the novel, where the importance of the parts is necessarily subordinated to the whole (12).

In the “Introduction”, I suggested that a spectrum exists between the short story collection and the novel, with the short story cycle situated closer to the short story end and the composite novel closer to the novel end as their names suggest. The ability to hold contradictions would appear to be a quality shared by both these ‘hybrid’ forms.

Mann also speaks to *where* in the text the complication occurs. Of Joyce's *Dubliners* she says, ‘As with many short story cycles, the book's final meaning is complicated by its last story, which (in this case) is much longer than the other stories’ (38).

In the core texts, the complication does not come right at the end (although whether this is generally true of the composite novel is beyond the remit of this essay): in *Olive* it comes in the eleventh story of thirteen, “Security”; in *Goon Squad* in the penultimate story, the complication being one of form rather than content (“Great Rock and Roll Pauses” is in the form of a PowerPoint presentation); and in *Legend*, it comes at the mid-point of the central novella “Sukkwan Island”.

At the heart of *Olive* is Olive Kitteridge's fractured relationship with her son, Christopher, and yet it is only in “Security” that we gain an insight into Christopher's perception of the mother/son dynamic. Section 2.3 sets out Strout's

reasons for not focalising a story through Christopher's point of view. None the less, the revelations in this story make us reassess what we have learned about the situation up to that point.

The form and content of all three books provokes a similar process of re-evaluation as the reader absorbs the text, the provocation to reassess, in the main, being on account of collision.

With the *Goon Squad* it is principally the different styles of narration of the stories that provide the contradictions, rather than a lack of congruity in the information readers acquire from story to story. Egan says:

My goal was not to do the kind of 'standard' linked stories where there's a uniformity of mood and tone but to go radically the other way and have each one almost collide against what comes before and after it ... I guess the result was a reading experience that felt different although I didn't necessarily know that that would be true (*TV Book Club*).

Egan gave a talk on character in which she speaks of the tightrope writers have to negotiate between surprise and inevitability. She says that 'getting at the particular conflicts at work in an individual is the critical job of characterisation' and that good characters are not consistent, not least because of the effect of the passage of time on people (Center for Fiction). The new information we learn about the recurring characters in *Goon Squad* accumulates in a way that makes them more rounded and, interestingly, more believable.

Whereas, in the case of *Legend*, the novella "Sukkwon Island" contradicts all the other stories, not only in its style of narration (third person as opposed to first); but, most critically, in terms of its storyline. It is particularly striking as the book has its basis in autobiography and, from the dedication and acknowledgements in the book, as well as the surrounding publicity, most readers will be aware that the key event portrayed at the centre of "Sukkwon Island" cannot possibly have really happened: after all, the author is still alive to tell the tale. But even if we were, as readers, completely ignorant of the autobiographical aspect of the book, the dissonance between the content of the novella and that of the other stories would still have an extremely unsettling effect on us, simply because it is logically impossible for the two situations to coexist.

Lorrie Moore, who when discussing the publication of *Legend* in its two different guises – first as a collection of short stories and then as a novel – says of it as novel, ‘it is the more accurate and forceful way to view the book. Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*, is one of many prior examples of such overlapping and arguing tales written as a novel, and it is unfortunate that Vann’s book wasn’t published that way initially.’

Vann confirms that it was his intention that the narratives should ‘debate’ with one another (*New Yorker* “Five Questions”): the ability of the composite novel to hold contradictory positions and to give them equal weight is one of its unique strengths.

Contrary to what one might expect, the simultaneous presentation of material that is not congruent can give the composite novel, when read as a whole, the ring of truth. In my “Conclusion”, I consider why this might be so.

5.3 The Long and the Short of it

Many writers and critics consider the short story and the novel to be such different creatures that to enclose them within the same cage could be fatal to one species. (Ali Smith compares the short story a mythical beast – see section 3.2). Other analogies, however, can be interpreted to show how the two forms can co-exist, despite their differences. Ruth Franklin begins her 2011 review of two short story collections like this:

The short story is an *amuse-bouche*: luscious, glittering, to be consumed in a single bite... It should restrain itself to the confines of its setup rather than spilling out messily over the edge of the page ... it should satisfy the reader’s immediate appetites while making him or her hope for more. What it is not, in other words, is a shrunken novel. The story seizes a moment of emotion and captures it under a bell jar. The novel takes the long view, working extended magic through patterning and repetition, more like a multi-course meal: formal or informal, paced leisurely or at a rapid clip, but always exhaustive.

The contrast is stark. As well as commenting on scope (more of which below), Franklin speaks of restraint versus extension, an echo of Smith’s views (cited in section 3.2). And yet, to extend Franklin’s food analogy further, is it possible for a

multi-course meal to be comprised of many very small dishes? Yes! Would you like a glass of Rioja with your Tapas, Madam?

Like Franklin, William Boyd also considers the one of the differences between the forms to be a matter of scope, ‘the ideas, the inspiration, that will drive a novel, however succinctly expressed, have to be capable of endless augmentation and elaboration. The essence of almost every short story, by contrast, is one of distillation, of reduction’ (238).

Boyd, however, dismisses the analogy of ‘the novel as an orchestra and the short story as a string quartet’ because, as he explains, you could never get the same sound from a quartet as you could from a full orchestra, but ‘a paragraph or a page from a short story is indistinguishable from a paragraph or page from a novel’ (238-239). The same literary resources are available to both forms enabling the one to comfortably inhabit the other.

The composite novel form allows authors to augment and elaborate on their ideas and material by setting them out across many different stories thus satisfying the expectations readers might have of a novel without the authors needing to comply with many of its constraints. But, in the same way that Tapas is a very particular kind of a meal (dividing tomato soup, followed by a roast dinner and sticky toffee pudding into tiny portions would not pass muster); the composite novel cannot be thrown together any old how.

Madison Smartt Bell speaks of the liberations and latitudes of what he calls ‘modular design’:

What modular design can do is liberate the writer from linear logic, those chains of cause and effect, strings of dominoes always falling forward. Modular design replaces the domino theory of narrative with other principles which have less to do with motion (the story as process) and more to do with overall shapeliness (the story as fixed geometric form). The geometry of a modular design . . . will be defining and confining to some degree. But the gain can be more than worth the sacrifice. The very fixity of the substructure can give the writer more latitude to improvise freely around the hidden armature with plot, character, and voice (215-216)

The ‘strings of dominoes always falling forward’ is an apt and lovely metaphor for what Smith calls the constraining need for ‘sequence’ and the need to ‘move at length from one thing to another’ in a novel (see section 3.2).

The flexibility to arrange the constituent parts of the composite novel may free authors from some of these constraints but, by way of a trade-off, the importance of the element of ‘design’ (in Smartt Bell’s term ‘modular design’) cannot be underestimated. Without structure and pattern the book will not cohere; without exploitation of the freedoms allowed, why bother using the form?

For all the reasons set out, it is evident that the tensions inherent in the composite novel form (whole versus parts; freedoms versus constraints; interrelated versus autonomous) have been successfully negotiated by my chosen authors to produce three very fine books.

^{xii} Columbo is a detective from an American TV series who invariably solves his crimes through feigning ignorance.

6. Conclusion – The End Game

Timothy Paul Guest, writer, born 17 July 1975; died 1 August 2009

I first encountered Yogesh as a seven-year-old who was living at the commune, *Medina Rajneesh*, at the same time that I also briefly lived there. The thirty or so children were schooled and housed in a separate building – *The Kids' Hut* – so unless you were a parent or a teacher, adults had little contact with them.

They roamed about the place in gangs, often in fancy dress, and it seemed to me that they enjoyed an unusual degree of autonomy and freedom. I was intimidated by their precociousness and tended to give them a wide berth. But I remember Yogesh. His mother held a key position in the commune's hierarchy and I expected her son to be blooming and beaming. Instead, he was an awkward, unhappy-looking child with missing teeth.

In May 2005, our paths would cross again. By that time, he had published his critically acclaimed memoir, *My Life in Orange* and had reverted to his birth name of Tim Guest. Having read the book, I understood why he had looked so miserable as a child. We met at a session he taught on life-writing at which I was a participant. Had I not known who he was, I would not have recognised him because he had grown into a confident, self-assured adult and, as I had anticipated, he did not remember me either.

We spoke after the class and I told him of my project to write about my experiences as a sannyasin, albeit in a fictionalised form. He endorsed my copy of his book, 'Hope it helps with the research!' and was generous enough to give me his e-mail address. I have a tendency to save such things, waiting for that elusive, perfect moment.^{xiii} As things turned out, I waited too long.

Late on the 31st July 2009, Guest's wife found him in bed in his boxer shorts with *Radiohead* on his ipod. He was dead (Day). I was deeply saddened by the news; more so than I would have expected given the brief and tangential nature of our connection.

I claim no privileged insight into Guest's death, but note his observation that he had become interested in the virtual world of *Second Life* (the subject

of his second book) when he was the same age that his mother had been when she got involved with sannyas. He says:

the reason that she and her friends went into communes was to try to find a way to be together under the very isolating pressures of capitalism ... it struck me that virtual worlds ... were a more modern solution to that same problem: how do we be together when we feel so alone? (*More 4*).

I chose an extract from this as my epigraph to *Cult*.

Guest's post-mortem revealed a morphine overdose. His friends and family are convinced that it must have been accidental as he was in a good place in his life at the time: a promising career, not long married and considering starting a family (Day).

But who can ever really know? From personal experience, I can say with authority that the uncertainty surrounding a sudden and untimely death makes it even harder to bear.

*

The abrupt transition from an account of a tragic death of a real person to a discussion about the unknowability of people in general may jar. I am concerned that it should not be disrespectful. How can I encourage the reader fill in the gap in the way I intend? ^{xiv}

- a) Turn it into a multiple choice exercise with options that make the reader take ownership for his or her responses;
- b) Ensure that the surrounding material gives the reader a strong steer both in terms of tone and content;
- c) Let go. As Strout says of *Olive*, 'I feel very strongly that people bring their own life experiences to every book, and so whatever book I write will be a different book for every person who reads it. It's their book: I give it to them' (*The Morning News*).

^{xiii} I have numerous business cards in my possession, useless because their donors have moved on (the editors at *Granta* who published Guest's memoir being one such example). It would seem that my reticence to call in such favours does me no favours.

^{xiv} I hope and believe that Guest would have found this intervention funny rather than disrespectful.

6.1 More Human Than Human

E.M. Forster says of fictional characters (whose inner lives the novelist chooses to expose):

we have been told all about them that can be told; even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe (57).

Our knowledge of other people in real life is limited. Fiction is unique in its ability to render interiority which it achieves by using focalisation through a character: principally free indirect discourse and interior monologue, although stream of consciousness is another technique famously used by Modernists, such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.^{xv} These techniques are available to fiction writers of any form and, in the context of this essay, the question must be, what, if anything, the composite novel form adds.

The authors of the core texts were all keen to confront the unknowability of people. In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, Strout asks the question that is central to her book : ‘how well does any one of us know anybody, really? ... We think we know the people close to us, but we don’t, we really don’t’ (*The Morning News*).

The theme of the unknowability of ‘the people close to us’ is reflected in the text, for example when, after Henry’s stroke, Olive wonders whether he would have laughed at a particular anecdote and decides that she does not know: ‘You could be wrong thinking you knew what people would do’ (*OK* 106); and the book ends with Olive surprising herself by starting an intimate relationship with a Republican. This suggests that, even with access to a character’s inner-life, our knowledge of people – even of ourselves – is only ever provisional.

Egan’s characters are more extraordinary but she is equally interested in the relationship between the outer and the inner:

there’s a dissembling that’s a part of everyday life, and I’m interested in that chasm between the public and the private ... I’m walking around looking at people, thinking what are they like to themselves, when no one is watching? There is no way to know. Those questions preoccupy me (*onethejournal*).

Egan's approach towards characterisation is twofold: on the one hand she seeks to undermine any stereotypical preconceptions we might have about a character – for example, a record producer or a kleptomaniac – and on the other, she believes that a 'continuity exists even though it may feel like we are different people over the course of time' (*onethejournal*).

Hence, the characters in *Goon Squad* are rounded with various quirks and contradictions to their personalities but remain reliably themselves throughout, for example, Sasha had a wild youth and was a kleptomaniac but matures into a thoughtful and devoted mother of two – and yet her essential character appears stable: similarly, in the case of Lou, we 'see' him in different roles as father, lover, and mentor; he may be youngish and drug-taking, or infirm after a stroke but, even on his death bed, he is still the same old Lou. Egan's aim was to show the essential nature of people over an extended period of time and faced with changing circumstances.

Vann's project has a different emphasis. He wrote *Legend* in order to understand his father in the light of his conflicted feelings and the conflicting accounts he had been told. He believes that character is revealed under pressure and places his characters in jeopardy with the harrowing novella "Sukkwan Island" in which both Roy and Jim die. In his acknowledgements, as stated, he cites a quotation from Grace Paley, "Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life" (*LoS229*).

It would be hard to conclude this essay without a reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, believe me, I have tried. The political theorist Andrew Robinson goes some way to explaining why I struggle with Bakhtin, 'his works tend to be 'allusive' and 'repetitive', irritating those who seek an economical and logical presentation'.

Robinson helpfully summarises Bakhtin's ideas on the self:

the self cannot tolerate fixity: what it "is", is undefinable. A person also cannot be fully revealed to or known in the world, because of constant change and "unfinalisability."

The authors of the core texts have all been at pains to present rounded and open-ended depictions of their protagonists. They chose the composite novel form to do so, partly, because it facilitates the presentation of different viewpoints, voices and

scenarios which, together, build a more nuanced portrayal. The characters in these books are not fixed and this reflects our experience, as readers, of the human condition.

6.2 More True than True

A novel's truths are not reducible to a formulation, a proposition. They are partial, provisional ... The novel's wisdom is the 'wisdom of uncertainty'

- McIvanney and Ryan, xiii

In section 5.2, I set out some of the complications and contradictions contained within the texts. One of the many examples cited is that, in *Olive*, we gain a fresh perspective on Olive's relationship with her son Christopher through his dialogue and actions in "Security". Robert Birnbaum asks Strout about this, 'Did you accept the testimony? ... I'm not sure what I thought about her son's reaction to her and whether or not he was being fair' (*The Morning News*). Calling the different points of view presented as 'testimony', by implication, positions the reader as a judge tasked with assessing the evidence before taking a view as to what to believe.^{xvi} In a court of law, an account that is not consistent and is riddled with omissions would fall apart under cross-examination. 'But earlier, you told the court 'A'; now, you are telling us 'B'; how can you expect anyone to believe a word you say? (It is a cross-examination technique referred to in my narrative "Curriculum Vitae"). The omissions would receive equally short shrift. However, with the composite novel, it is not necessary for the reader to come to any final decision as to which version of events is correct – the different accounts simply coexist, side by side without one or another prevailing as the 'truth'. Indeed, the core texts seem to have the 'ring of truth' about them notwithstanding or, even, *because of*, the contradictions and omissions. This chimes with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of 'polyphonic' truth.

Bakhtin adopts the musical term 'polyphony' for a 'plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses'. Writing about Dostoevsky, he says:

What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a

plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with his own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event (6).

In Bakhtian terms, a text is polyphonic if it ‘allows’ diverse characters to their express conflicting opinions in their own way (speech-patterns, vocabulary, vernacular and so on) seemingly free from domination by the author or narrator – I say ‘seemingly’ because, of course, all the voices in the text are, in reality, the author’s creation). According to these terms, I query whether *Legend* is truly polyphonic because, in spite of the different styles and accounts, the author’s presence and views remain discernible. (If “Sukkwan Island” is, in part, an act of revenge, it is hard to argue that the character of the father is given an autonomous life of his own). By the same token, a polyphonic novel is not necessarily a composite one – for example, the requirement that the parts are ‘individually complete and autonomous’ (Dunn and Morris 2) may not be met.

Bakhtin’s notion of a polyphonic truth that embraces conflicting opinions and voices and gives them equal weight free from an obligation to choose one over another, or to average them out, or synthesise them is important to the project of all three books – including *Legend* which, notwithstanding my stated reservations, presents multiple versions of what happened. Indeed, the events at the heart of *Legend* are antithetical and incapable of synthesis. And *because* (again, rather than ‘even though’) the novella in *Legend* cannot be squared with the rest of the book it provokes a reaction. In his review of the book, Peter Wild says, ‘In the final reckoning, if a book is to be judged purely on how much it forces you to interact with it (by which I mean, think about as you read, discuss with others after you’ve read), then *Legend of a Suicide* is a resounding success.’

The core texts are so successful because they exploit the effect of gaps and contradictions on their readers. In the chapter on *Goon Squad* I gave examples of readers’ engagement with the gaps and used Iser’s reader-response theories to explain them. Iser also theorises why the different perspectives and styles can lead to a more realistic experience for the reader:

The reader himself operates the ‘fusion of the horizons’, with the result that he produces an experience of reality which is real precisely because it happens, without being subjected to any representational function. Reality, then, is a process of realization necessitating the reader’s involvement, because only the reader can bring it about (226-227).

In the same way that a stereophonic image or a hologram uses more than one image to render depth in a visual sense, the multiple views of a protagonist or situation add an extra dimension to the text. And, just as the fusion of two images takes place in the brain to create the illusion of 3D; the *fusion* (rather than merely the imagining) of the various portrayals of the characters and scenarios takes place in the mind of the reader to create an enhanced sense of ‘reality’.

Ali Smith used the following quotation from John Berger as one of the epigraphs to *The Accidental*:

Between the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narratives being offered to give a sense to that life, the empty space, the gap, is enormous (Berger 176).

A polyphonic approach to both character and the truth is presented in these works which makes them both challenging and true: *challenging* because, as readers, we have to do more work than usual to make sense of the texts (and, even then, we may be left uncertain); and *true* because it resonates with our ‘experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet’. Berger’s statement is from 2002: since then, the rise of social media has resulted in our experience of life becoming even more fragmented. The impact of these developments is explored in the final section.

^{xv} Film can also render interiority to some degree with the voiceover but, as viewers, we always remain on the outside.

^{xvi} This interview was published on the 26th August 2008 (before the Pulitzer Prize win). In a discussion over a year later (October 2009) in answer to a question about why there is no narrative from Christopher’s point of view (i.e. focalised through him given the book is all in the third person) Strout says, I ‘didn’t want Christopher’s point of view to come in as Exhibit B’ (Colgate Panel). Strout qualified as a lawyer, but it is also possible that her earlier discussion with Birnbaum may also have influenced this line of thinking (*The Morning News*).



City and Country

6.3 Now and Then

The main building of the commune where I once briefly lived has now been renovated into apartments called “The Manor”. The developer’s brochure boasts of ‘period details in abundance’; ‘stone mullion windows’ and a ‘spectacular oak staircase’. The history of the building as a private home and a Japanese school (run by Shi-Tennoji monks) is treated as a selling-point in the brochure, but the fact that it was once *Medina Rajneesh*, the British headquarters of the sannyasin movement, has been air-brushed out (*City and Country*). The development was featured in the property pages of *The Telegraph* in an article which ends, ‘today it serves as a monument to Britain’s new religion: property’ (McNeill). Implied by this statement is that those same property pages, along with the developer’s brochure and the plethora of television programmes devoted to the purchase and refurbishment of property, have become the religious tracts of our times.

*

In his 2005 article, Hensher observes that the novel form arose in conjunction with capitalism and imperialism. He says that it is therefore fitting that a book on the end of imperialism (V.S. Naipaul’s *In a Free State*) should be set in a fragmented world. With reference to David Mitchell’s work, he suggests globalisation is another reason why this ‘new form’ (that is, the composite novel and its cousins) might be emerging. In 2013, in the context of a Zadie Smith short story being published as a stand-alone hardback, Hensher again mentions ‘newly entwining forms, where disparate short narratives combine to make a larger whole’ (*Guardian*). Eight years after his original observations, the ‘new form’ is still around, and still comparatively new.

In *The Novel Now*, Richard Bradford summarises the development of the novel from Modernism to the 1970s and identifies two main strands: those that ‘tell stories’ and those that are about ‘the telling of stories’ (7). The title of his first chapter ‘Realism Versus Modernism’ names the combatants. Subsequent chapters

deal, thematically, with developments from the 1970s to the present (the book was published in 2007). The chapter on “The New Postmodernists” concludes, ‘the battle between realism and modernism/postmodernism is ... effectively over. Neither side is victorious but the middle ground of fiction is shared by hybridized versions of both’ (78).

The novel-in-parts is now fairly commonplace: *A Possible Life: A Novel in Five Parts* by Sebastian Faulks, *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson and *NW19* by Zadie Smith are all 2013 publications from popular and successful writers. Douglas Coupland coined the term ‘Translit’ for works that span different time periods, such as *Gods without Men* by Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*. Other books collage different genres, such as *Levels of Life* by Julian Barnes (also from 2013).

The ubiquity of social media means that the way we receive information is even more fragmented than ever. The filters as to what is important have gone; public and private narratives are blurred; Twitter delivers news of a chemical attack in Syria and a photograph of someone’s new puppy within the same second, in the same format, and all in up to 140 characters. It pours in like fresh water and raw sewage delivered through the same narrow pipe. And Twitter is only one source of many – there is the internet, now portable in the pocket; TV and radio (in their new smart and digital incarnations – *Listen Again*, *On Demand*, *Catch Up* wherever and whenever you want); there are e-books; newspapers; magazine; podcasts and – the still alive and kicking – conventional book in print.

How are we to make sense of all this information? A form that reflects the fragmentary nature of the data – different styles, registers, genres, media – with which we are constantly bombarded could not be more fitting for the world we now inhabit.

And today’s readers are sophisticated enough to ‘get it’. Film has been influential on prose-style for as long as it has been around: the adoption of the jump-cut in fiction being a testament to this. More recently, audiences for the work of David Lynch and films, such as *Pulp Fiction* with its fragmented structure and *Memento* with its backwards chronology, have whetted the public appetite to the pleasures of perplexity; and the episodic form of TV series, such as *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing*, *The Wire* et al. are now staples of our cultural diet. In the previous section (6.2), I suggested that the core texts are challenging but, of course, that very

much depends on what you compare them with. Yes, they may require the reader to work a little harder as compared with a conventional novel that tells a story in a very straightforward way, but the core texts are none the less reader-friendly with memorable characters and drama aplenty.

There are still those who question whether the novel will endure. Tim Parks expresses a deep weariness with the conventional narrative arc in both long and short fiction:

the tendency to reinforce in the reader the habit of projecting his or her life as a meaningful story, a narrative that will very likely become a trap, leading to inevitable disappointment followed by the much-prized (and I suspect overrated) wisdom of maturity, is nigh on universal.

Certainly, it is a narrative that is replicated in many television reality and talent shows these days – the background music shifts into something by *Sia*, *Coldplay*, or *Alt-J*, and we learn of a contestant's tragic backstory, invariably involving a dead or dying relative. The contestant will then pledge a determination to give 150% effort to the task at hand. The 'wisdom of maturity' is never the offered prize, but the narrative is, otherwise, much as Parks describes. He goes on to say:

intrinsic to this approach, is the invitation to shift our attention away from the moment, away from any real savoring of present experience.

Given my interest in meditation, Parks' concern is one that I ought to share but, personally, I don't go to the novel to savour the present moment, I go to my meditation cushion, or for a walk, or I potter around in the garden. And, personally, I have no doubt that our appetite for story will endure.

We are familiar with the assertion that there are only seven or eight basic plots in the world (Thomas 131-187). They have existed for millennia and transcend cultural differences (Booker 2-3); and the universality of such stories have led some to conclude that human beings are hard-wired to respond to them (Porter Abbott 3). That the novel is capable of finding new forms (or refreshing old ones) in order to tell these stories is a mark of its resilience. As Egan, the self-confessed 'literary-theory nut' says:

Really, almost everything that's been done since was done in *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* ... Just remember this was invented as a flexible, strong and swaggering form that could do all kinds of things that other forms couldn't do (Rosenblum).

Parks is like a member of the magic circle who, knowing the secret of how the woman is sawn in half, can barely suppress a yawn when he meets her in her dressing-room having a last fag before she takes to the stage. But for those of us not quite so jaded, the show will go on and we take our seats in anticipation. The novel's acts will continue to evolve to reflect social conditions and accommodate the concerns of its authors and the appetites of its audience. From the three fine examples I have examined, and for all the reasons set out in this essay, I believe the composite novel form to be a performance particularly suited to our times.

*

Will you please now put your hands together one last time and give a BIG TOP round of applause to thank OLIVE KITTERIDGE; THE GOON SQUAD and, last, but not least, the one, the only, the heroic ... LEGEND OF A SUICIDE.

7. CODA

Lost

Medina – where are we now (sic) is a webpage with photographs and brief details of people connected to Medina as they were then and, where such information is available, as they are now (Medina). Yogesh gets a mention; I, thankfully, do not. It records that a number of people have ‘left their bodies.’ e.g.:

Left his body Nov 05 after being sick for a while;

Left her body 23 July 2012. She was found unconscious in her apartment and died later at the hospital; ‘she’d had a long fight with alcoholism;

Left her body 14 March 2012 from cancer;

Left her body after a short illness 14th March 2012 ... (Medina).

Rationally, I understand that the mortality rate may be no greater than for any other demographically equivalent group of people but, none the less, learning of the deaths of all these people thirty years or so after knowing many of them is a sobering experience. The entry for ‘Yogesh (now Tim Guest)’ does not say that he left his body but reads:

Then: Kid at Medina; Studied psychology at Sussex Uni. Published a book on his time at Medina - see the extract on his site.. & 8/09 passed away (Medina).

More poignant to me, however, is that when you click on the site to which you are directed to see an extract from Tim’s book - www.timquest.net (his author website) you are met with a blank avatar, much like this one:



Accompanying it, are the words:

‘Not Found’.

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APPENDIX A

Appendix A.1

Methodology

The chronological reconstruction of *Olive* involved mapping two identifiable factors: the page number of the book; and the stated or implied age of Olive Kitteridge at the time events occur. The page number alone proved insufficiently precise for the purpose of this exercise and the order of the information on each page was also recorded e.g. 63/1 for the first fact or event on page 63; 63/2 for the second, and so on. The working document, from which the Excel spreadsheet was developed, is extracted at Appendix A.2 by way of example. It shows two pages of entries from ‘A Little Burst’. This was a time-consuming and laborious exercise and the document for the book comprised 137 pages of double-spaced type. (The same process was repeated in respect of *Goon Squad* and *Legend* resulting in several hundreds of pages of working documents).

Strout is explicit about Olive Kitteridge’s age when various key events take place. For example, we are told that Olive is sixty-nine and her husband, Henry, sixty-eight at the time of the hostage taking incident in “A Different Road” (104). From this we know that Henry is a year younger than Olive. The time of narrating of “A Different Road”, is also stated as being a year after the event:

Still, after a year had gone by, people in this small New England coastal town of Crosby agreed: Both Kitteridges were changed by the event’ (104).

Distinguishing between the time of narrating and the time of the narrated events was critical to the chronological reconstruction. However, that is not always clear. For example, the book opens with the narrative “Pharmacy”. In it we are told that Henry has retired from being a pharmacist (3) and that the site where the pharmacy used to be is *now* (i.e. at the time the story is being narrated) ‘a large chain drugstore with huge glass sliding doors’ (15). However, the time of narration is vague:

Autumn now, November, and so many years later that when Henry runs a comb through his hair on this Sunday morning, he has to pluck some strands of gray from the black plastic teeth before slipping the comb back into his pocket (14).

Also, I could not always identify precisely *when* an event described in a text had taken place and sometimes had to make a best guess. For example, we learn that Olive Kitteridge's father committed suicide but we are not told when his death took place (38). (It was of consolation that Genette also encountered this difficulty when analysing *Recherche*. 'The fourth probably also takes place somewhere within that period, since it brings about a modification in the content of the insomnias' (*Narrative Discourse* 44)). A certain amount of guesswork was therefore involved in the chronological reconstruction but, none the less, through a process of deduction, it was possible to figure out Olive's age when most of the key events in the text occur.

Another factor, which led to a lack of precision, is that *I* had to decide which events were significant. The births, marriages and deaths of the main characters were obvious choices but, after that, the decisions became more subjective. The uncertainty around these matters was, in some respects, in keeping with the nature of the composite novel form in that an event or character that is significant in one narrative may be only peripheral or fleeting in the context of another.

If a lack of precision was a disappointing aspect of my method; the process of chronological reconstruction also brought unexpected benefits. The close reading and amanuensis (copying out of passages of text) involved in performing the exercise facilitated an unparalleled immersion and familiarity with the text. As will be seen from the extracts of my working document at A.2 verbatim quotations – some of them lengthy – were also included. Consequently I became aware of recurring images and turns of phrase of which even Strout and her editors may have been unaware. For example in "A Different Road" did Strout really intend to write both '(she) straightened her back' and 'Olive straightened her back' separated by only one paragraph? (112 -113). This strikes me as an error as, I can see no literary justification for the repetition. Further Olive is not shown to 'slump' between the two occurrences so the repeated action lacks credibility.

Also, I noticed that Strout uses an odd technique of having a character think something and then say it: e.g. 'She had needed to go to the bathroom. "I need to go to the bathroom," she had said...' (106). Analysing the book's structure through the process of the chronological reconstruction made me acutely aware of its *content*.

The process also involved a fair amount of amanuensis – the copying out of passages verbatim from each of the books. This helped me become better acquainted with the core texts and, fanciful though it may seem, gave me the sense that I was also becoming better acquainted with their authors.

Stephen King calls the process that takes place between writer and reader, telepathy: ‘I sent you a table with a red cloth on it, a cage, a rabbit, and the number eight in blue ink. You got them all, especially that blue eight. We’ve engaged in an act of telepathy. No mythy-mountain shit; real telepathy’ (117).

I was not merely reading the writer’s words, I was typing out several pages worth of the very same words in the very same order as my chosen authors had. Elizabeth Strout recounts the act of copying out sentences she admired during her self-directed apprenticeship in the craft of writing:

I would copy it out to see what does it feel like to write that sentence and then I started to keep a journal - not to record anything except to practice my sentences...and...would try to find a muscular sentence and it began to pay off, because I could find a way to go into the crevices of those areas of life that I couldn’t get to with my previous thinner sentences... (Colgate Panel).

Wolfgang Iser, a key figure in Reader-Response Theory says:

If reading removes the subject-object division that constitutes all perception, it follows that the reader will be “occupied” by the thoughts of the author, and these in turn will cause the drawing of new “boundaries.” Text and reader no longer confront each other as object and subject, but instead the “division” takes place within the reader himself. In thinking the thoughts of another, his own individuality temporarily recedes into the background, since it is supplanted by these alien thoughts, which now become the theme on which his attention is focused (293).

If the act of reading causes the individuality of the reader to recede, the effect is arguably amplified in the act of amanuensis. My pen forms the same motions in shaping the letters, words and sentences; my fingers hit the same sequence of keys that my chosen authors had. It is the writerly equivalent of stepping into someone else’s shoes, a form of submission and empathy, if you will.

Francine Prose observes that ‘after I’ve written an essay in which I’ve quoted at length from great writers, so that I’ve had to copy out long passages of their work, I’ve noticed that my own work becomes, however briefly, just a little more fluent’ (3).

Similarly, I felt that the process of chronologically reconstructing all three books changed the way I wrote. The enterprise was a form of apprenticeship.

Appendix A.2 – Extracts from working document from which Excel spread was sheet developed.

Chronological story from A Little Burst

71/5 – When Olive was pregnant with Christopher her father had told her he sometimes felt like ending it. Olive didn't take it too seriously. But he was serious.

68/3 – Olive's mother told her not to trust anyone after someone left a basket of cow flaps by their front door.

62/2 – Olive hasn't always been big but she has always been tall.

65/4 – When Christopher was a child he was reading Heidi and painted a picture of wildflowers on an Alpine hillside.

71/ 6 – Christopher was scared of Olive when she tried to teach him how to play the piano.

67/6 – Christopher had a nosebleed in class and broke out in hives through fear of a spelling test.

63/1 – Olive and Henry designed the house and had it built for Christopher. Their own house, which they also built, is a few miles down the road.

63/2 – Christopher appreciates the place. Over the last few years Olive, Henry and Christopher have taken care of it.

65/3 – Christopher told Olive he could lie in bed and watch the snow fall through the skylight.

68/6 – Olive had worried about Christopher getting lonely and coming home once she and Henry had gone.

66/2 – Henry and Olive had previously thought that Christopher would marry a teacher but that didn't last long.

72/4 – Before Suzanne came on the scene Christopher told Olive that he sometimes thought about ending it all an uncanny echo of something Olive's father had said to her thirty-nine years before.

67/6 – Olive had a heart attack before

71/8 – Last Christmas Olive took Christopher to the doctor where he was given a prescription for depression.

72/1 – On the way home from the doctors, 'All the way home he talked to her about serotonin levels and genetic tendencies: it might have been the most she had ever heard him say at one time. Like her father, he is not given to talk.'

66/3 – Suzanne came out of the blue. She was visiting for a conference and had an ingrown toenail. She looked in the yellow pages and found Christopher.

66/5 – Suzanne and Christopher decided to get married within six weeks. ““Why wait?” Suzanne said to Olive the day she and Christopher stopped by to show off the ring.’

64/6 ? – Olive imagined herself having a heart attack at her son’s wedding.

63/4 – A few weeks ago Suzanne pointed at the petunias and commented that she like the nasturtiums.

64/1 – A child was supposed so sprinkle rose petals on the ground before the ceremony but refused and sulked. Dr Sue was nice about it and cupped her hand around the child’s head. Christopher looked stiff as driftwood.

61/1 – Christopher Kitteridge was married to Suzanne

67/4 – Christopher looked pale as he was getting married. Suzanne’s mother cried. Afterwards she asked Olive whether she cried at weddings and Olive said, ““I don’t see any reason to cry.””

67/5 – Weeping came nowhere near what Olive felt as her son got married. She felt her heart would squeeze shut. ‘And she felt it, too, at the way the bride was smiling up at Christopher, as though she actually *knew* him...’

67/7 ‘No, what Suzanne was mistaking for knowing someone was knowing sex with that person for a couple of weeks.’

68/1 Olive found the look disconcerting.

66/4 – Suzanne told the story of how she met Christopher on account of her blister all day. Olive thought the story stupid as Suzanne should have bought shoes that fit.

61/3 – Olive Kitteridge felt panicky all afternoon

61/2 – Olive Kitteridge is standing by the picnic table thinking it is time everyone left.

61/4 – Olive goes and lies down on Christopher (and Suzanne’s) queen-size bed.

62/1 – Olive has to arrange herself carefully so as not to wrinkle her dress and so she looks decent.

62/3 – Olive suspects she looks like a seal wrapped in gauze but is pleased with her dress and considers it better than the grim clothes worn by the Bernstein family.

62/4 – The door to the room is ajar and Olive can hear the sounds coming in from the rest of the house. She can also smell various perfumes.

Appendix A.3

Discrepancies in the timeline

Olive goes to New York to visit Christopher when she is seventy-two (210). At the time, Christopher's second wife, Ann, is pregnant with his child. Henry dies before his grandchild is born (252), i.e. within six months of time of narration of "Security" given that Ann's stomach is 'huge and hard' at the time of Olive's visit (205). This is four years after Henry's stroke (215) which must have therefore happened when Olive was sixty-eight, and Henry, sixty-seven, or thereabouts. And yet we are told in "A Different Road", that Henry was sixty-eight at the time of the hostage taking. Even allowing some leeway, for birthdays being at opposite ends of the calendar year, there is a discrepancy here.

As we have established (see Appendix A.1.), the time of narration of "A Different Road" is a year after the event (104) which would make Henry at least sixty-nine at the time of narration and he should therefore have already had the stroke which seriously incapacitated him:

Henry got out of the car and fell down. Never stood up again, never walked down the pebble path to the house again, never said an intelligible word again (173).

However, the exchange between Olive and Henry at the end of "A Different Road" which is congruent with the time of narration – a framing narrative if you will – shows Henry fit and well and quite capable of walking and talking (122-124).

We can also deduce approximately how old Olive is when Christopher marries his first wife Suzanne – another pivotal event, a knee or hip joint in the skeleton, a place where the overarching narrative bends. Christopher was married to Suzanne for only a year when he announced his divorce (144). Henry and Olive were both getting used to retirement at the time. In "River", we learn that Henry had a massive stroke soon after that (252). We have already established that Henry had his stroke when Olive was sixty-eight. That puts her at sixty-six/seven when Christopher divorces (allowing leeway between the announcement of the divorce and the deed) and therefore sixty-five/six at the time of Christopher's marriage (the time of narration of

“A Little Burst”). Christopher is thirty-eight when he marries (66) which means that Olive was twenty-seven/twenty-eight when she had him.

This exposes another potential discrepancy in Stout’s chronology as Christopher’s first marriage takes place less than a year after he had come to her and told her that he sometimes felt like ending it all:

An uncanny echo of Olive’s father, thirty-nine years before. Only, that time, newly married (with disappointments of her own, and pregnant, too, but she hadn’t known that part then), she said lightly, “Oh, Father, we all have times when we feel blue.” The wrong response, as it turned out (71).

For Olive’s response to her father to have made a difference to her father’s actions, the conversation and the suicide would have had to have been relatively close in time. (I note that, in the “Conclusion” to my essay in the section on Timothy Guest, I also use the phrase ‘as things turned out’ for events that are separated by some four years. I do not think the phrase, in itself, suggests a temporal proximity but, rather, the fact that Olive considered the response she had given her father to have been ‘wrong’.)

And yet, in “A Different Road”, one of Henry’s accusations against Olive is that ‘from the day your father died, you took over that boy’s life. You didn’t leave him any room ...’(121); which means that, at the time of Olive’s father’s suicide, Christopher was already a boy and old enough for his mother’s domination to have an adverse impact on him. Several years must therefore have passed between the conversation Olive had with her father, when unknowingly pregnant with Christopher, and her father’s suicide. That her father shot himself and left no note is revealed in “Incoming Tide” (38-39) which comes earlier in the book.

Appendix A.4 Frequency/Iteration

Food

We learn early that Olive is ‘a big woman’ (34). The weight of other characters is also pointed out. In “The Piano Player,” Angie’s ‘figure, while still graceful, had a thickening of its middle’ (49). In “Starving,” Harmon observes of his wife, Bonnie, ‘her waist had thickened considerably, and so had his’ (81). Later in the story he worries that his wife has stopped having sex with him ‘because he’d gotten fat’ (83).

In “Basket of Trips”, Olive eats the chocolate brownies prepared for the wake and observes that ‘if she drank, she’d be a guzzler’ (168; 170). And Kerry Monroe is described as ‘stick-thin and high-heeled, thrusting out that black-suited pelvic bone’ (169). In “Security,” we are told that after Jim O’Casey’s sudden death, Olive ‘lost weight, looked better than ever for a while, which lacerated her heart with the irony. Henry reached for her often those nights’ (214).

Louise, the woman in “Tulips” whose life has been blighted by her son’s savage murder of a woman, is ‘stick- thin’ (151). Olive’s appreciation of Louise’s beauty verges on the homoerotic:

Olive was surprised by the beauty in the woman’s face. “Don’t mean to stare,” Olive said – she had to say this because she knew she was not going to be able to stop staring – “but you look lovely” (151); and

Olive watched as Louise stood and moved through the room. Louise bent to straighten a lamp shade, and the sweater fell across her back, showing the thin form of it. Olive didn’t know you could be that thin and still be alive... “You’re very thin. But you certainly do look beautiful” (155).

Hunger

In “Starving”, Olive has the audacity to tell Nina, the young anorexic woman, “I’m starving, too ... I am. Why do you think I eat every doughnut in sight?” (95). Olive’s statement is met with incredulity and ‘disgust’ by Nina (96). Similarly, in “Ship in a Bottle” Julie Harwood – who was taught by Olive – recalls her saying: ‘Don’t be scared of your hunger. If you’re scared of your hunger, you’ll be just one more ninny like everyone else’ (195). Now older, Julie realises that Mrs Kitteridge was talking about more than just food (195).

Loneliness

In “Pharmacy”, the first story focalised largely through Henry, we learn that, ‘the possibility of Olive’s dying and leaving him alone gives him glimpses of horror he cannot abide’ (16-17).

In “A Little Burst”, we learn that before Christopher married, Olive had worried about him being lonely. At the time of narration of the story, his wedding day, she observes: ‘loneliness can kill people – in different ways can actually make you die’ (68).

Minor characters are also concerned about loneliness. For example, in “Starving”, focalised through Harmon, he observes a customer Bessie Davis and ‘he saw her loneliness as a lesion on her face. The words *Not me, not me* crossed over his mind’(102). Harmon’s wife Bonnie has stopped having sex with him and the realisation that he does not want to end up like Davis leads to the story’s resolution: Harmon telling Daisy Foster that he has fallen in love with her and making plans to leave his wife.

The Olive/Christopher storyline:

In “Pharmacy” Henry says that he had to keep an eye on Olive (O.) to ensure she was not too hard on Christopher (C.) (as an adolescent) and refers to their ‘fast and furious fights’ (4-5).

In “A Little Burst” Olive recalls how C. had been scared of her when she had tried to teach him the piano (71) and how, as a child, he’d broken out in hives because he was afraid to take a spelling test (67). It also tells of the house they had designed and had built for C. and their pride in it (63). C. decided to marry six weeks after meeting Suzanne (66). O. imagined herself having a heart attack at her son’s wedding (64). Weeping came nowhere near what Olive felt as her son got married. She felt her heart would squeeze shut. ‘And she felt it, too, at the way the bride was smiling up at Christopher, as though she actually *knew* him...’ (67). O. overhears Suzanne discussing Chris. ‘He’s had a hard time, you know. And being an only child – that really sucked for him...’ (70).

O. would like to say, “Listen, Dr. Sue, deep down there is a thing inside me, and sometimes it swells up like the head of a squid and shoots blackness through me. I haven’t wanted to be this way, but so help me, I have loved my son.” (72).

O. ruins some of Suzanne’s things. She thinks about Suzanne not being able to find her show and wondering what had happened to her sweater and shoe. That she will be disconcerted gives Olive comfort (73). Olive decides to keep the self-doubt alive. “Christopher doesn’t need to be living with a woman who thinks she knows everything. Nobody knows everything – they shouldn’t think they do” (73).

In “Starving” Harmon knows that O. does not like C.’s new wife but thinks that she would not like any wife of her son (95).

“A Different Road” tells of C’s move to California (106). O. avoids driving past C.’s old house. O. thinks of how different things might have been if C. had married his receptionist: ‘Olive could see why he’d passed on her. His wife was not stupid. She was pushy and determined, and mean as a bat from hell’ (113). O. remembers the quality of frustration in the way she’d spoken to C. when he was a child (117).

Held hostage at gunpoint, the couple have a terrible argument about why C. left. O. says it was because he’d married a Jew and thought his father would be judgemental. Henry says it’s because “the day your father died, you took over that boy’s life. You didn’t leave him any room. He couldn’t stay married and stay in town, too.”(121)

In “Tulips”, O. recalls leaving C. napping in his crib when he was a baby (157). C. married a woman Suzanne who O. and Henry found ‘bossy and demanding’ (142). O. and Suzanne disagree about flowers and Henry tells O. not to tell Suzanne that she is mistaken (142). C. tells them that they are moving to California less than four months after their wedding (142). Olive’s world is turned upside down by the news. When she sees the For Sale sign outside C.’s house ‘it was as though splinters of wood were shoved into her heart’ (143). Henry took to sitting with his head in his hands but cheered up one day announcing that C. would come back because ‘the coastline is his home’ (144). When they wanted to visit, C. says it’s not a good time and O. is flooded with images of being cruel to C. when he was a child (145). When

C. visits Henry in the home, he is stricken by the state of him and does not stay long (147). But O. is glad to have C. there 'she was like some helpless schoolgirl' (147).

Christopher calls once a week but says 'no' when O. offers to fly out there (149). O. fantasises about killing herself. 'Now she thought she would leave no note. Not even: "Christopher, what did I do that you should treat me this way?"' (150) O. remembers: 'how as a much younger woman she had felt the dreariness of domestic life, yelling, while Christopher ducked his head, "I hate being a goddam slave!"' (150). O. finds it easy to tell Louise about C.'s divorce (154). O. lies to Louise about the frequency of C.'s visits (156). C. is uncommunicative when O. phones him. O. feels a familiar upset:

But she seemed caught between the pincers of some intractable remorse. A personal, deep embarrassment flushed through her, as though she had been caught in the act of shoplifting, which she had never done. It was shame that swiped across her soul, like these windshield wipers before her: two large black long fingers, relentless and rhythmic in their chastisement (160).

O. sees a photo of C. not yet two and thinks how he will move across the country and break his mother's heart (161).

In "Basket of Trips", O. is annoyed because she usually avoids driving past C.'s former house (166). She has only told Bill and Bunny Newton about the divorce (168). O. riffs in the form of internal dialogue on how things with Christopher have turned out:

No wonder Henry had a stroke![...]A woman, even Marlene Bonney's age, could expect one day to outlive her husband. A woman could even expect her husband to get old and have a stroke and stay slumped in a chair at a nursing home. But a woman did not expect to raise a son, help him build a lovely house nearby, get started in a steady podiatry business, then have him marry and move across the country and never move home again, even when he found himself deserted by a beast of a wife. No woman, no mother, expected that. To have a son stolen away (168).

O. comments that C. would not have her live with him for five minutes (174).

In “Security”, O. visits C. and his new wife in New York. O. remembered what hope was:

That inner churning that moves you forward, plows you through life the way the boats below plowed the shiny water, the way the plane was plowing forward to a place new, and where she was needed. She had been asked to be part of her son’s life (203).

Christopher seems furious with O. because she got lost at the airport and has no cell phone (203). O. is shocked by the contrast of where C. now lives compared with the house they had built him (204). None the less, O. is happy to be with her son: O. wants to say, “It’s awful good to see you, kid” but neither of them say anything.

She would have sat on a patch of cement anywhere to have this – her son; a bright buoy bobbing in the bay of her own quiet terror (211).

And while everything remained strange, like a foreign country, she could not let go of a certain happiness inside her; she was with her son. At times he was talkative, at times he was silent, and he was most familiar to her then. She did not understand his new life, or Ann, who said things that seemed to come from a Hallmark card, but she did not see in Chris any signs of moroseness, and that’s what mattered – that, and simply being with him again (220).

Despite trying her best, O. is judgemental about C.’s new wife:

The first time around, Christopher married someone mean and pushy, and now he’d married someone dumb and nice. Well, it was none of her business. It was his life (223).

When O. mentions that people used to compliment her on how polite Christopher was, she’s not sure if Ann and Chris exchange a look (225).

O. is aggrieved that C. did not point out the spilled ice-cream on her blouse. She decides to return home early (226). O. and C. have an enormous row before she

leaves. C. says, "I knew this was going to happen. I knew something would trigger things off" (227). C. talks to her slowly and calmly saying, 'I'm not going to take responsibility for the extreme capriciousness of your moods.' O. asks why C. is talking when he's never talked in his life. Then she realises that it's the therapy and that she's been discussed and the phrase, 'capriciousness etc' comes from that (228).

C. tells O. she behaves paranoid and one minute she's one way the next she's furious and how wearing it is for people (229).

C. says that they'll call a car service to take her to the airport. O. is appalled she'll be sent alone but Chris explains they have work and the children. O. accuses them of kicking her out and C. says that's another example. In the past it would make him feel terrible but he's not going to react (229).

They continue to argue. Chris says he doesn't want to put up with it anymore. Olive complains she's been treated badly for years. Chris says she has a bad temper and 'can make people feel terrible. You made Daddy feel terrible' (230)

Ann tries to check Chris but he says he's no longer going to be in fear of her. O. cannot believe how calmly C. is answering her: 'Calm as the Muslim who sold him a newspaper each morning, before sending him off on a subway to blow up' (230).

Olive starts to cry. She says even worse things. Chris answers calmly and says she behaved as though Jim O'Casey's death was Dad's fault (230).

O. says that C. with his new wife who is so *nice* it makes her want to puke. It goes on like this, 'Olive crying, Christopher calm,' until the car comes (231).

At the airport, O. panics with the queues and security requirements. She thinks of what C. had said during their argument: that these days they'd send around a social worker, 'if a kid showed up that way' (232). She'd asked Chris why he was torturing her when she'd only ever loved him. Olive decides she cannot call her son or his wife as they are 'cruel' (232).

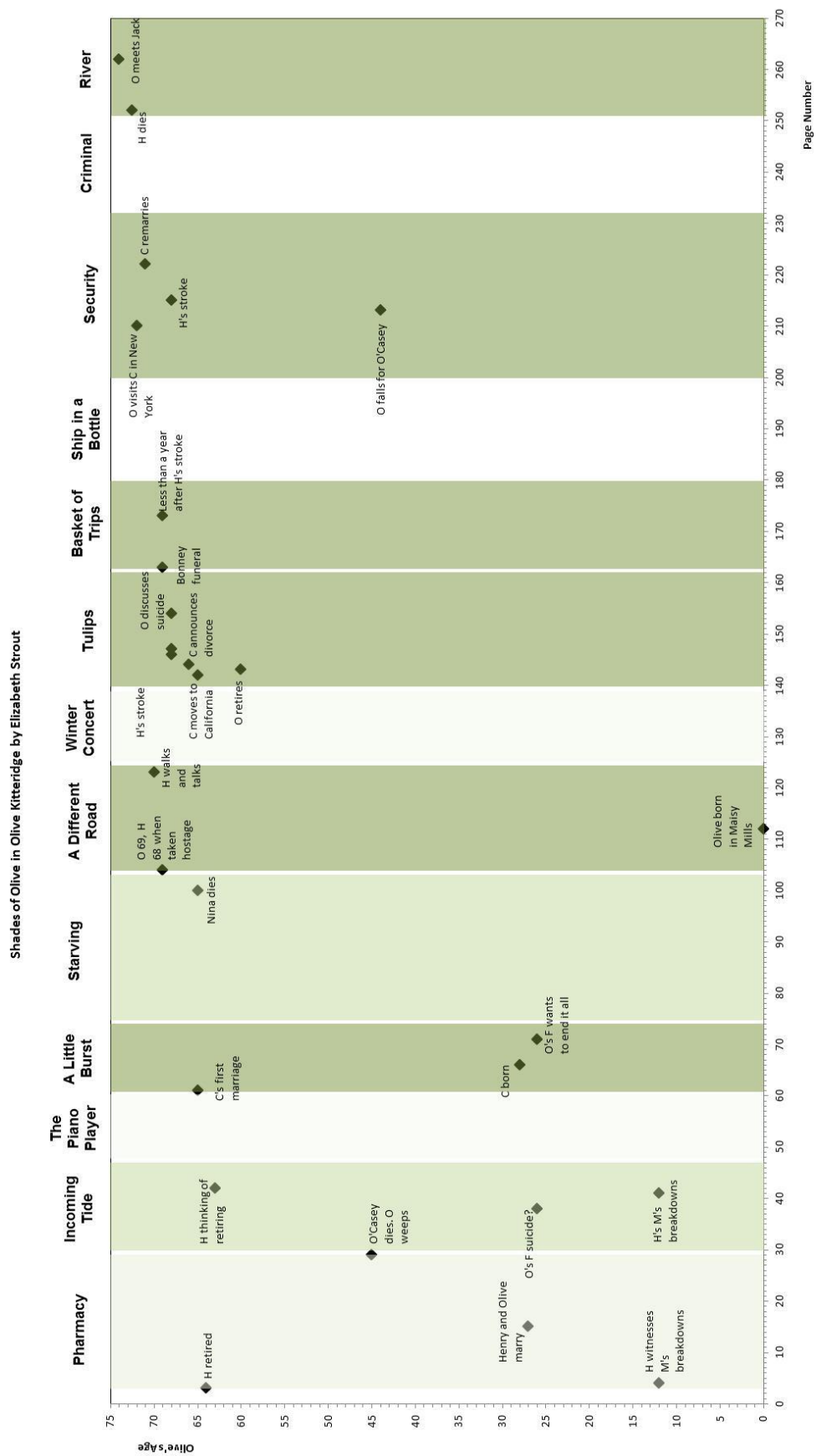
In the final story, "River," O. observes that C.'s happiness makes him nicer (260).

O. is angry that C. never calls her. He says his life is "Crazy, hectic" and she almost hates him for this (262).

She calls C. to confide in him about Jack being a Republican and he is curt saying that he thought she'd called to ask after her grandson (266). O. blames C's

therapist for his attitude (267). Finally, O. confides in Jack that she hit her son. 'Not just spanked. Hit' (269).

Appendix A.5



APPENDIX B

**Transcript of interview with David Vann at *The Small Wonder Festival* in
Charleston - 26 September 2010**

D.V. Just remind me again what the context is for, it relates to university right?

V.J. I'm doing a PhD and I don't know how you work in the U.S. but here I'm doing 70% which is creative work and I'm doing a series of linked narratives about four and a half years I spent in a cult which is why I wanted to –

D.V. Oh wow!

V.J. And then you have to do 30% critical work and the critical work has to have some hinge or connection with your creative work and I'm doing books that are kind of in parts, maybe sold as novels. So I'll do probably *Cloud Atlas*; *Hotel World* by Ali Smith but I'm particularly interested in yours because it's also got the memoir aspect.

D.V. Hmm...

V.J. But I'm not sure – you know how PhDs are, they meander all over the place – quite where the focus is going to be, but at the moment it's structure so I'm going to ask you a couple of questions on structure –

D.V. Yeah, sure be happy to –

V.J. OK so, structure. I have looked at quite a few interviews with you as I didn't want to ask the same questions you'd answered hundreds of times so –

D.V. Uhuh

V.J. On the New Yorker Site you give a pithy answer to the structure thing and you said:

The five stories and the novella have to be read together and in that order to gain their full meaning. Each reflects on the other and modifies or debates, not only in content but also in style, borrowing from the stylistic debate of *The Canterbury Tales*. Together they manage to present the full story.

Can you remember in what order you actually wrote those stories? I presume it was number one first because you wrote that 18 years ago...

D.V. Yeah. I pretty much wrote them in the order they appear. I can't remember for sure but I think it's possible that the novella "Sukkwan Island" actually was after "Higher Blue" or "Ketchikan" the last two that are in there. The first three I know I wrote in that order and I know the novella comes after them and I can't quite

remember when I wrote “Ketchikan” and when I wrote “Higher Blue”. I think it might be in the order it is now except that “Ketchikan” was actually last.

V.J. OK so it’s the last two swapped?

D.V. Yeah and it’s possible that the novella was after them but I don’t think so. I think I had both those stories before I wrote the novella. So I’m sorry I can’t remember for sure. It was such a long time ago and I was working on them for a long time. So I can remember what I was doing with each story and what the influences were but I can’t remember exactly the order.

V.J. And once you had them and you thought, OK, these are going to be in the book, how much rewriting did you have to do to get them to sort of nicely sit together?

D.V. I didn’t do any rewriting...

V.J. Didn’t you?

D.V. ...to make them fit each other.

V.J. I’m surprised because they’re sort of bookended with stories with a similar structure –

D.V. Yeah.

V.J. And I don’t know if you were aware there’s a sort of passing the baton between the stories...you know, the first one ends with an eye, the second one starts with an eye; it ends with hunting, the next one starts with hunting; “The Legend of Good Men” ends with a car “Sukkwan Island” starts -

D.V. With a car, yeah.

V.J. Then you’ve got a ferry or a boat and it starts with a ferry, and then the last one doesn’t tie together quite so neatly but there’s cooking, he’s cooking up for these people who come round –

D.V. Yeah

V.J. And then there’s cooking of the pudding. I thought you must have had to do something to make them fit –

D.V. (laughs) I had no idea. No that’s right, a lot about writing is that there’s all this pattern being in there, and is real and it’s meaningful and connects and is cohesive but not intended or known at all.

V.J. So it’s the unconscious sort of patterning it –

D.V. Yeah. The whole thing was an unconscious process writing it really. The biggest one that sticks out is the big surprise halfway through the novella when the boy kills himself when I thought I was writing to the father’s suicide, but there were

a lot of other surprises throughout and that's what I rely on in fiction. I love that actually, so... And thank you for reading so carefully that you noted those because I'd never seen those. I had no idea. That's kind of a wonderful thing. Thank you. Yeah, it's a little gift. Thank you.

V.J. So, I think I need to turn the page...

D.V. Yeah, it never occurred to me.

V.J. I'm just going to digress because it just seems appropriate. I think I told you in my e-mail that my father also killed himself when I was 19. When I fictionalised it I've written this novel that I also haven't been able to sell (yet) called *The Consequences of Falling* – because he actually threw himself off a building – but when I fictionalised it I made it the narrator's mother which changes the whole psychology of it.

D.V. Right, right.

V.J. But then I was reading some stuff that you'd written and I thought, God, you got *so* much closer in your novella than I did to sort of putting yourself in your father's shoes and I just don't want to do that especially with my Mum's still alive and all that stuff...

D.V. Yep, right.

V.J. And I guess it's up to the writer how much distance you –

D.V. Yeah, well that was a conscious choice. I did feel – I've mentioned in other interviews – I felt that I was cowardly in some way in the stories so maybe that's just kind of normal because it's disturbing to get too close. But I realise that the stories, for whatever reason, didn't get close enough to an understanding of his despair really. You couldn't actually map out any reasonable trajectory for how he ended up with suicide. And so, with "Sukkwan Island" that my goal to get closer to him and try and face it a bit more directly and try to get really as close as possible to the despair and understanding its workings and what it was really about and how it attached to all the different parts of the story. And so that's why I thought I was writing towards his suicide, I thought that the thing would be a novella that leads finally to his suicide and explains it much more than anything before. Then I got bushwhacked by the boy killing himself halfway through. But I do think that "Sukkwan Island" comes much closer to his despair than the other stories do. You see his kind of bipolar: like euphoria and then depression, and also how he blames the stepmother, the kind of pathology of that and then his guilt. The second part of

the book is largely about his guilt so that's what I was trying to do, that's what it's supposed to be about.

V.J. But there's also a constant theme about his hopelessness really. The first story when he lets the boat just sink because he leaves the plugs out –

D.V. Right.

V.J. And in the last one he doesn't have enough eggs to make his pudding –

D.V. (Laughs.) Right.

V.J. I mean he's just a bit hopeless throughout. As children we want our parents to be competent and it's disappointing when they're a bit useless.

D.V. Yeah, that's partly my view of him, as you found out earlier. [I interviewed David following a talk he'd just given with Adam Marek – Fathers and Sons – at The Small Wonder Festival in Charleston when both David and Adam read out the stories for which they'd been short listed for the inaugural *Sunday Times* EFG Private Bank Short Story Award. Following their readings the session was thrown open for a Q and A when a member of the audience remarked that both stories showed a certain disgust with the older man. David said that, as a boy, he hadn't had any positive male role models. (The story he read was about a particularly odious Uncle (Jim) and his friend Big Al and, of course, his father had also been disappointing.) It's made him feel uncomfortable about getting older himself – he said something like, 'it's a horrible thing, no one should have to go through it.']

Holy Crap. I'm so scared about that –

V.J. It felt very generous actually, being a member of the audience –

D.V. I'm a little horrified I did it. I really think there's going to be fall out. I usually try to be more careful and I think the problem with saying stuff like that is that emotions are pretty raw for me still, so what I'm saying is probably pretty far off the mark. It's probably extreme and not entirely true. That's the problem with speaking about something you actually feel –

V.J. And can be taken out of context...

D.V. Yeah and so I'm actually honestly a little worried about it having said all that –

V.J. But also what I think, as someone listening to it, there's this thing about you becoming older and the fears you may have around all that. Because I used to do a lot of child care work and I was acting for a kid where the father killed the mother or something like that and the child would be scared of being this monster and, and so for me, that's the thing you gave away that's so revealing.

D.V. Well thank for the generous reading. That's nice.

V.J. Yes, so, this is about fictionalising. In *The New Yorker* "Live Chat" that you did online there was one reader who said, 'oh, you had a sibling, the boy had a sibling, Tracy, in the novella but not in the short stories', he mentioned the number of bedrooms. You said well the novella had more space so it needed that back story but the stories didn't need another sibling and I was wondering how much – both of you on stage today were saying how the needs of story takes precedence over the facts...

D.V. Yeah.

V.J. Adam changed his fish; you conflated all these incidents...

D.V. Yeah, absolutely.

V. J. That's your primary drive in shaping or creating – the needs of story.

D.V. Oh yeah absolutely. I'm not really writing for therapy and I'm not writing for describing things as they were or getting all the incidental stuff in like. I'm just writing to create something that's paranoid and cohesive and meaningful and feels like it has some power to it, and it's alive and so I'm happy to do anything: I'm happy to sacrifice some family for it; I'm happy to have any kind of transformations go on, happy to leave anybody out.

V.J. Yeah.

D.V. And so it's whatever the story needs. And the extra sibling really is extra. Like in the structure of a story having a sibling who's paralleling the protagonist in some way is totally useless unless they are actually the antagonist, they just have no function. So I recommend to all my students, just cut out your siblings, I always do that. I've never seen in a student work a really useful sibling. There are published instances where siblings are useful, but I think they have to veer more towards being the antagonist or having some role as mediator or something that's important for one of the parents or protagonist and because my sister was younger I think that's part of why she just didn't play an important role like that, so I've never been interested in writing about her. And I actually think she could have been cut out of the novella, I think, you know, if I were writing it now, like, I don't actually think it's necessary. It was just as his homesickness, that he missed his sister and Mum, the different things he had in Santa Rosa and all that. So it helps make that more credible that there's a lot to miss.

V.J. But the Mum and the sister otherwise have the same function in terms of the Dad and then turning up later and being upset about the whole thing.

D.V. Yes. And then for the father I think it's in some ways more crushing to imagine having to tell his daughter that her brother's dead than, I guess because you want to protect your children it seems more devastating to crush your kid rather than your ex-wife so maybe she has that kind of function also.

V.J. I haven't got many more questions...

D.V. No, that's fine.

V.J. In the book you play with the relationship between what we remember, what we imagine and what we make up. For example towards the end of the second story, Rhoda, you have Rhoda wearing jeans but your narrator imagines her wearing this dress and the next minute she *is* wearing that dress.

D.V. Right, right.

V.J. And then and in the last story there's this moment that I found quite devastating when Roy opens the cabinet beneath the sink and crawls in and you touched on this a bit when you were talking about fiction being able to deal with material more strongly than memoir. It can address all the demons because fiction reveals the unconscious patterns –

D.V. Right, exactly.

V.J. And I've heard it said that facts can get in the way of the truth. Do you think there's an element of that going on?

D.V. Absolutely. I think that's a great quote and a great way to say it, that fiction can be more true to a real life than anything lived in that life. I absolutely believe that because it's more compressed and takes out the incidental stuff so you can have all of it add up and put more pressure on someone and you can see them revealed and understand that that's actually who they were all the way along and even if something in real life never put enough pressure on them to reveal that exactly, fiction can. And I think that's true. Yeah. I love fiction for that reason.

V.J. Me too...

D.V. I write non-fiction too. I've actually written half and half. I've written three non-fiction books and I'm on my third fiction book now, but the fiction is what comes alive for me. And non-fiction, I'm interested in it. I wrote about a school shooter for instance, a book that's coming out in September in the U.S. and that seems important to have all that information out there and to try to understand him, but it doesn't come alive in the way that fiction does for me.

V.J. You already know what happens. Do you know the poet Fred D'Aguiar because he was at the university, Virginia Tech, and he's a creative writing professor and he's addressed the issues through his poetry so I was wondering if you'd heard of him?

D.V. No. No .

V.J. And so my last question was that the fact that there are contradictions between the stories seems to irritate people, some people, but also, I think, my feeling is that it's the making of the book, not the making of the book but it's critical to the book, it makes it unique and special. But it's more than just different viewpoints and it's more than just the road not taken, the road not travelled. Can you say something about the contradictions and their role in making a whole?

D.V. Yeah, it came out of – as you may have read in other interviews – it came out of that no-one in my family could agree on who he was, what had happened or what it meant. That everyone had a different story so there was no one true story, so that's really, I think, the genesis for all of it. But I think that contradictions are important because, for instance, having in the novella the boy kill himself flip everything is partly important, I think, because writing succeeds through indirection. I think that psychologically this material was difficult for me and so it was easiest to tell it at some sort of slant. So after the boy kills himself, the father ends up discovering the boy and there's a description of grief on finding someone after a suicide which I'd never done directly when writing about exactly what I felt after my Dad died. And then he also describes the body in a lot of detail. I never saw my Dad's body and, for a long time, I had fantasies that maybe he wasn't really dead and I had a lot of denial, and so I think that's why the body's described in such detail. So I think that sometimes flipping things around or the contradictions, that's the only way to tell the story, I mean there's just kind of a functional aspect to it where I just couldn't tell it actually other ways and then I think that the kind of collisions that happen between the stories in the style and the types of stories that they are, I hope that, I think that that shows different ways of reading or understand the event and the family history, so the last one is a bit more hopeful for instance in its tone and it's partly because it's the least realistic. It also comes closest to the actual facts – it has the place and time and everything of the actual death which the other stories don't do, so it's interesting to me that I wrote fabulism, the most unrealistic kind of style as I got closest to the actual truth of the events of exactly when and how he did it.

V.J. I am I right in remembering that it was March 1980?

D.V. Yeah.

V.J. Because my father killed himself in March 1978 and apparently – you probably know this – most suicides take place in the spring rather than any other time of the year. That seems weird. It should be a time of hope and yet –

D.V. Yeah, he's in Alaska, he's almost through the winter you know, but I guess that last little bit or something, of trying –

V.J. They say it's because that's when people should be feeling hope and they still don't feel hope –

D.V. Yeah, OK...

V.J. So they think, well, fuck it, this is all too much...

D.V. Yeah. It's very sad, it's a preventable kind of thing because they're all depressed and something like 80 or 90 per cent of people who get treated in some way for depression, like have positive responses, so you know, so it definitely feels tragic to me. You know I'd like to just have him around still and I still love him and it seems like it was avoidable. You know he was alone in a new house with no furniture in the middle of March in Alaska, I mean, what the hell?

V.J. I wrote that I wish there was some sort of alternative to suicide where you could just be stuck in a box and every year you'd be opened up and asked, 'Do you still want to be dead?'

D.V. (laughter) That's a great start to a book actually. Yeah, that's a great one, I love that.

V.J. Because obviously I've thought about it a lot –

D.V. Yeah. Well I think you won't get encouragement from publishers or agents to do strange structures and that's why for 12 years no one would – I think the main reason was the structure – also the title having 'suicide' in it.

V.J. Yeah.

D.V. But I do think that it's good to follow what is the truest way of writing it that you can find despite whether that might have appeal so I hope that you write the way that you want to write it.

V.J. Thank you. You know I think doing it as a PhD I think, O.K. at least I'll get a PhD out of it, hopefully, even if it doesn't go anywhere. Thank you very much for you time.

D.V. Yeah. I'm sorry about your history too, like it's a long time. You've had 32 years, I've had 30 and, boy, the legacy goes on for so long. I could see in your eyes... yeah I know that feeling. Sometimes I get surprised by it. You know I talk about him all the time now, but I still find myself bushwhacked occasionally and just get this really powerful feeling. It's amazing to still have that after so long. Actually I'm glad of it because I was afraid it would also disappear and I'd forget him, it turns out there's no risk of that. So that's good. Great. Well good luck with everything and thank you.