

“Translating Metaphor: Understanding Experience.”

Jo Parnell

University of Newcastle

Poets may use metaphor more often and in a more elaborate way than the rest of us, but metaphor is in everyday speech as well. Ordinary people use metaphors when they are working to understand their deeper experiences and make sense of those experiences for themselves and for the person they are talking to. The docu-memoir, the form I have chosen to write in, depends on this aspect of language. Docu-memoir is the jewel in the crown because it brings out a deeper level of meaning in the speech and the reflections of ordinary people as elicited by the docu-memoirist. When speaking to the interviewer who gives a context or setting that they otherwise never had in their ordinary everyday life, the subjects use metaphorical language. They use it in a way that opens up a whole new understanding for themselves and, incidentally, for their readers who are, in one way, a disembodied audience. As a result, subjects' stories are heard, respected, and valued.

There may well be a number of creative nonfiction works that are related to the docu-memoir. But there are very few literary works that are truly docu-memoir. The term 'docu-memoir' is difficult to pin down because it is a shifting body. It is a hybrid that shares borders with other similar works and so can stray into other definitions and genres. My research defines it as a literary work which uses the tape-recorded oral accounts of others who have led unusual lives as told by themselves to the writer. These audio-taped discussions are intended for use by the writer solely as resource material for a creative nonfiction literary production. In docu-memoir the memoir is not that of the writer but that of the subject as told to the writer. The documentary factor is the hard data, historical and archival material, which the subject cites to support their story of their experience. Even though the docu-memoir uses

interviewing techniques similar to those used by oral historians, it is not an oral history project, rather literary prose. It is a work of creative nonfiction that depends on the subjects' use of metaphor. It is its very literariness which sets it apart.

My research looks at creative empathy, at how writers turn the raw experience of others who have led unusual lives into literary creative nonfiction productions. The writer who writes with creative empathy is non-judgemental, and uses sympathetic understanding when recreating the raw experience of others as creative nonfiction—a mix of metaphor, fact, and story. My research project consists of two parts. In the research paper I look at the techniques and methods and approaches of writers of docu-memoir as models for my own creative nonfiction work. From these I learn ways in which to make my docu-memoir aesthetically pleasing, interesting, and informative to the reader. I find ways to do this without altering the facts of the various cases, and without altering the subjective 'truths' of the participants. One such writer who is useful as a model for writing is Tony Parker.

Tony Parker's works are docu-memoirs that deal with marginalised communities—most famously, with prisoners—over the mid part of the twentieth century. Oral historian Lyn Smith says that these were people “who were never heard, social pariahs often who seldom had the chance to express what they felt inside” (247). Parker uses his art to show what life is like for the people who live in those communities. He tries to strip away the mystery in order to take the reader as close as possible to examine questions such as: Who are these people, and why are these people here? Who are we, and why are we here? The book I will most focus on here is *Lighthouse* (1975), a work which is itself a metaphor for the isolation and loneliness of a marginalised life. Indeed, an actual lighthouse can also be seen as a metaphor for isolation and loneliness and marginalisation. It sits on the outer edges of land, on the outskirts of a country, and so, on the boundaries of the society which it protects.

Parker is possibly the first writer of creative nonfiction to craft his books entirely on extended interview material from which he edited out most of his interview questions. In *Lighthouse* the interviewer's questions are not directly present on the page but they are implied in the informants' conversations. Parker's techniques point to the metaphorical intent of his work. In the Acknowledgements at the end of his book Parker explains his only intention is to convey the essence of what has been said in order to give "some impression of the world" within a closed and marginalised community (287-88). For examples of Parker's techniques of metaphor, a few pages into the book, a young Cornishman drinking in a bar, says, "That's right my handsome that's what I am, a lighthouse keeper, yes" (13). The young Cornishman adds that the "only way you could really find out what it was like" out on a lighthouse "would be to come off there for a few weeks to live with us, have a proper chance for each one of us to talk to you, wouldn't it? Why don't you write up to Trinity House in London again, ask them if you can come and stay with us for a bit?" (13). Even though the Cornishman is presumably speaking to Parker, the way in which Parker structures his book indicates that the Cornishman is actually inviting the reader to come on a journey out to the lighthouse and see for themselves what life in the lighthouse community is like. From these conversations the reader is able to infer that there is a narrator, and assumes this identity to be a male and also the invited interviewer of the lighthouse people. This impression is furthered by the old retired keeper who more or less opens the book, when he says, "A very good day to you too young sir! . . . A book, you've put that out of your mind have you? No, I didn't think you would, somehow. You've brought your infernal tape-recording machine with you I see," (18). According to Bella Bathurst, Parker "devoted himself to the art of being a witness in print" (289).

Through the subjects' use of metaphor in their conversations, Parker ties life in the lighthouse community to ordinary life in general. Principal Keeper George Preston tells the

‘unseen’ interviewer and so the reader, that there “wasn’t a lot of training” given for this sort of life. He explains, “You only had a couple of weeks at Harwich or Blackwall depot, than you were sent off on different lights to pick up the rest on the job as you went along” (39). George Preston is referring to the training given by the Trinity House lighthouse-keeping service to the keepers for their work on the lighthouses. But in a way he could equally be referring to life in the lighthouse community. Or, since there is no specific training available for life in the broader sense, the reader could take George’s words as a reference to life generally. That is, in real life the training given in childhood is comparatively brief and does not complete one for life. One learns from life itself when one is sent out into the world as an adult. The reader is able to make a leap of association between what George is openly talking about, and the subtle but unintended nuances in his discussion. In part, this is because a few pages earlier George’s wife Connie has already shown the reader that, “as it has to be in the lighthouse service” the job is a keeper’s life, and therefore it is also that of the keeper’s wives and families (34).

Assistant Keeper Alf Black is a too heavy drinker, a senseless and uncaring drunkard when he is on shore leave. But out on the lighthouse where drink is forbidden and unavailable he is sober and sensible and caring. He is also a self-educated man. He listens to opera, enjoys crosswords, and reads Shakespeare. Alf also talks about some religious writer he cannot name but who has brought him to ponder the bigger questions in life. In talking about these things to Parker’s implied presence as the interviewer-writer, Alf employs metaphor to put his concepts into words. Through his use of metaphor, Alf also conveys what he means to the reader. This encourages the reader to think beyond what they are reading and contemplate deeper issues. Alf describes man’s spiritual being as various forms of ‘light’ gained from some outer source. He compares the unreliable light given off by a match to the more steady light of a candle, and he likens the light of a candle to that of a lighthouse: “The lighthouse is

a sort of fixed point isn't it that helps with navigation? And what I'm doing is to keep the light going for people to make their way. But it's the fixed point in my life too ... Out here's the sort of light and ashore it's the sort of dark. So long as I keep coming the candle's still glowing for me," (298). Alf adds: "Crikey, Tawney, I haven't half got myself in deep water you know, who'd have thought? ... I like thinking about things like that though; it'll go on in my head a bit now, will that" (298). In all this the informants are only talking in a straightforward and apparently honest manner about their life in the service and how it affects them personally. But Parker uses the informants' own metaphors to create metaphors of his own. He takes the opportunity to weight the informants' words with multiple layers of meaning for the reader.

By exercising his various techniques of metaphor Parker creates a sense of mystery and a certain romance about a community which he is attempting to demystify. Moreover, in so doing he somehow creates within the reader the desire to join the community. Principal Keeper Steve Collins dispels this desire within the reader by bringing the reader to face reality. He says, "Two months at a time is too long to be on a light" (245). Later, he says, "- Everything's dark and gloomy, yes. When I first came here this was what surprised me ... When you see it from the outside, the tower's white granite so you take it for granted that it's going to be light and airy inside" (283). Through his use of metaphor disguised as the actual conversations of the people who live in the marginalised lighthouse community Parker gets at the reader. He reminds the reader that no-one in their right mind would actually wish to live in the isolation of a gloomy, tower lighthouse. No matter however romantic it sounds or looks, a sea lighthouse forever has great seas crashing into it, shaking it to its very foundations. Assistant Keeper Stanley Vincent remarked earlier, "That's something should be got over to outsiders, there's nothing exciting about it. I don't think they want to believe it, they'd sooner hear romantic things" (199).

Through his use of metaphor Parker makes it clear to the reader that it is not possible to undergo raw experience as lived by others other than vicariously. Entering any world through reading is to enter that world as a sort of visitor. David Malouf rightly points out that, “reading is an interiorising activity”; “it is one of the ways ... by which we come ... into full possession of a place [or situation] ... in the imagination” (36, 39). Reading is not the same as being of that world. But, in *Lighthouse*, through his use of obliquely stated metaphor Parker conveys to the reader that we, as people, are all the same. Parker shows that lighthouse keepers are no different from any other person. One Keeper’s wife says to Parker, “I wish it could be got over to people that it wasn’t something freakish, that being a lighthouse keeper is not all that much different from any other kind of job ... You wouldn’t take it as a subject for a book if you didn’t think of it in the same way, an occupation that was slightly odd and a matter for curiosity” (Parker 232).

As part of my research project I am writing a docu-memoir about marginalised people now known as “Forgotten Australians”. These people are Anglo–Australians with mainly Anglo-Celtic heritage. As children, they were placed in Children’s Homes (orphanages,) or foster care, in Australia, sometime in the mid1900s. These Homes were little removed from the time of Dickens, and many people took foster children as a cheap form of labour. As children, most “Forgotten Australians” suffered severe hardship. They were subjected to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. As well, they felt the effects of displacement not racially or politically motivated, rather socially motivated. In this latter aspect, they differed from the children of the “Stolen Generations” who suffered the effects of racially and politically motivated displacement. They also differed from the so-called “British Child Migrants”, in that this latter group suffered the effects of socially and politically motivated

displacement. As adults, almost all of these people still carry the pain of their childhood, and have feelings of shame and humiliation.

I talked with some “Forgotten Australians”, and audio-recorded their oral accounts of their experiences and their feelings and thoughts, as resource material for a docu-memoir. In this work I will treat the psychology of the out-of-home child care community in mid-20th C Australia. I aim to show how this type of marginalisation affected the actual existence of the children who lived in that community. My goal is to show how this experience has had a profound effect on their lives, and how this affects our society. I want to take the reader close to my subjects to ask: Who were these children? Why were they there? What does it feel like to be them?

When transcribing the taped conversations I used a selection process. I moved these selections around for ease of reading and to bring the subjects’ stories forward to make a more inviting work for the reader. But I did not alter what the subjects said. In fact, the subjects speak for themselves in a language of their own making that they and others can easily understand. One subject, Mick R—, Riley, as I call him, was abandoned into an orphanage as a child. This experience had long-lasting effects on Mick’s later life. In his taped conversations, Mick uses metaphorical language to better explain what he means. This enables him to reach an understanding of his childhood experience as the source of his bouts of depression. At the same time, through his use of metaphor, Mick also conveys what this experience is like to the reader. He brings the reader to an understanding of the devastating effects of abuse and displacement in childhood on the adult. On the tape, Mick says, “So my reality is all I’ve got and it’s made me what I am and I figure I could be a lot worse, but with people like us ... you have to accept you’ll always have that monkey on your back. You can’t throw it off because it’ll just jump straight back on ... so you’ve got to learn to try and carry it with dignity” (Riley).

Mick employs appropriate metaphor to connect to his experience and make sense of that experience so he can come to terms with his demons: “See that pantry door? Say I didn’t know what a door was ... didn’t even know the word ‘door’. I’d be terrified of this thing that opens, terrified of where it goes or what’s on the other side—it’s the unknown, the not understood—a space or black hole full of terror of some sort. But once you know it’s a door and can call it by its name, and you know what it is and what it’s for, what it does ... and what’s on the other side ... then you understand and it’s not so terrifying anymore even if you still don’t like what’s behind it. Of course, there are still ghosts from the past, and even though you face them they’ll never go away. But *now* I understand what a door is I can close it on them, can’t I” (Riley).

Mick rewrites his experience in a way that brings self-understanding and also allows the reader to gain a sense of what the experience is like for Mick. In turn, this allows the reader to empathise. In his conversations Mick describes himself as an ordinary person. But because these conversations are intended solely as resource material for a docu-memoir, Mick has been given a specific context or setting and so expresses himself in a way that he most likely would not otherwise do in the course of ordinary everyday conversation. One example of this is when Mick explained about going into the Children’s Home. When he was a young child, he and his elder sister were put into a Home by his mother. Mick said: “We walked wiv me mother from me grandmother’s house to the Home, but we didn’t know where we were going. She didn’t tell us. She took us into the Home and said—‘You’ll both be staying in here for a while. I can’t keep you.’ I felt rejected. Rejection is probably the worst thing you can come up against ... if you’re a man. I don’t handle it well even now. But that’s probably a man thing too because when a man gets rejected he reverts to childhood—you feel hurt, upset, confused, it’s just knowin’ you can’t have what you want when you want it so you want it more. Like if you want a new car and you can’t have it—‘But why, I want it

... look, I've already got it!' See, I've already planted the scene in me head and it's growing and there it is, the car I bought standin' in the driveway out the front, and suddenly the scene pops, disappears, and the car drives off into the blue because you're told you can't have it— 'Oh, but I had it in the driveway!' You know it's not right because you know it should be you behind the wheel, and you're not. The car's gone, and no-one's really explained why. Back then I wanted me mother even though she was a screamer and scared me to death. She didn't tell me why she couldn't keep us. I suppose even if she had it wouldn't have helped me understand, not back then anyway. I still would've felt rejected—me mother wasn't a new car, but she took herself off into the blue and disappeared from me life" (Riley).

Another participant, Beverly Osborne, grew up believing she was an only child. When she was sixty-six years of age Bev discovered she had a sibling. She was contacted by the Department of Human Resources in Melbourne to tell her she had a brother, Geoff, and he had been looking for her. The official told her she need not acknowledge her brother if she so wished, and that would be the end of the matter. Bev decided to acknowledge her brother but said her feelings were "all over the shop" (Osborne). About her first contact with her brother, Bev said: "The lady from Human Resources gave me Geoff's phone number but she said I was not to ring him until after she had set a time and date and whatever for a first meeting. I said to her, 'but what if this person lives a million miles away.' So when I got off the phone we got the phone book and looked up where he was and it only just up the road in Albury ... too easy, no problem. When I finally got the go ahead from the lady at Human Resources I rang him, and *poor* Geoff ... poor Geoff tried to tell me his whole life history right then and then over the phone. I felt like I'd been run over. I couldn't take it all in" (Osborne).

Mick and Bev are but two examples of how ordinary people use metaphorical language to connect to their experiences. They translate their experience in a way that they can readily understand. Bev and Mick are examples of how ordinary people use metaphor to make sense of their experiences for themselves and the person they are talking to. Docu-memoir employs metaphors coined by the subjects themselves. By telling their stories in text, the subjects see their experiences outside themselves and gain new understanding. As well, they share their perceived shame with the reader and are no longer alone. In fact, the subjects create themselves as writers and readers of their own life stories rather than just sufferers of abuse. They watch their own healing. Theorists believe that such narrative brings readers to reflect, and learn something new. Literary narrative provides distance between the subject's personal self, and the reader. This allows the reader a space in which to gain insights into the subject's experience, and empathise. Docu-memoir allows these people a safe medium through which to speak out, and can give them a resonating literary voice.

Works cited.

Bathurst, Bella. "Afterword" (2006), in *Lighthouse*. by Tony Parker. London: Eland, 2006.

289-296

Malouf, David. *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness*. Sydney:

ABC Books, 2001.

Osborne, Beverly. Personal Interview. February, 2011.

Parker, Tony. *Lighthouse*. London: Eland, 2006.

Riley, Mick. Personal Interview. March, 2011.

Smith, Lyn. "Only Listen . . . Some reflections on Tony Parker's methodology" (1999), in

"Part VII: Conclusion" of *Criminal Conversations: an anthology of the work of*

Tony Parker. Ed., comp., Keith Soothill. Intro., Terence Morris. London:
Routledge, 1999. 243-254