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Ebb and flow: re-writing the past through the filter of traumatic memory

Abstract:

Memories of childhood were the dreams that stayed with you after you woke

— Julian Barnes

What if those dreams were nightmares and those memories haunted you in your waking hours? Drawing on the concept of the ‘primal wounding’ of the child and the unconscious splitting of the personality (Firman & Gila 1997) as the focus for my creative work, *Ebb and Flow* is a mystery crime novel offering a re-writing of the past through the filter of traumatic memory. Dissociation is the lens through which I show the ghost of my protagonist’s past trauma and its effects on her present behaviour, which ultimately implicates her as a suspect in an investigation to locate her missing daughter. Theorists suggest while trauma is relived literally in the nightmares, flashbacks and intrusive thoughts of its victims, its lack of integration into the consciousness of victims thereby restricts access to it (Caruth 1995). Due to this inherent latency of trauma, the protagonist’s past will be interpreted through two voices, Ebb’s which carries the wound and Flow’s which represses it. An extract from *Ebb and Flow* is used to illustrate how narrative strategies that mimic the symptoms of trauma, such as fragmentation and repetition (Whitehead 2004), can be aligned with the fast-paced linear narrative and literary devices typical of the crime novel. Aim is to create an original hybrid novel that rewrites the traumatic past and offers opportunities for readers and writers of crime fiction to work through and come to terms with traumatic events.

Biographical note:

Leanne Dodd is a PhD candidate at Central Queensland University, researching the representation of trauma in crime fiction. Under the pen name of Lea Scott, she has published three crime novels with developing themes of trauma, and co-authored three short story anthologies with Brisbane writers’ groups. Leanne serves in an Executive Management Committee position with Queensland Writers Centre and is an appointed mentor for emerging writers. She has appeared on seminar panels and facilitated writing workshops throughout Queensland.

Keywords:

Crime fiction – dissociation – childhood trauma – fragmentation – memory

Ebb and flow (an excerpt)

Flow

My earliest memories are faded and blurred around the edges like the Polaroid pictures I have of myself as a child. I am perhaps three or four. My mother reads to me, pointing first to the words then to the pictures so I make the connections. She brushes my hair in long, loving strokes and tucks me into bed with my worn teddy bear and a warm kiss to the forehead. My step-father is not present in these memories but I don't know if that's because he was not around then or whether some part of my small brain blocked him out to preserve only the good memories. My mother won't speak about it. She still blames me for his death. What I do know is there was a time when I felt safe and happy, and that it was a long time ago.

I read somewhere that people are born with an inbuilt fight or flight instinct. I was born with neither. Ebony, on the other hand, was always ready to fight. That other voice inside me who wasn't afraid of anything. I guess that's why I let her take charge for most of my life. To cope with life, sometimes you can only face a tiny bit of it. Somewhere along the way, *she* became the custodian of all that I wanted to forget.

* * *

I suck in my breath and stare into the darkest corner of the room. 'Last night in my nightmares, I was back at the lake'.

One minute I am inside the lake house, spotlighted under a warm glow as I carry my sleeping daughter Charlie toward her bedroom. She feels leaden. My footfalls echo down the hall and I step more gingerly between the flagstones so as not to wake the precious bundle of blonde locks and pink skin cradled in my arms. I tuck her safely under the pink sheets, breathing in the fresh scent of apple blossom in her hair. Brushing strands of it from her small and delicate face, I kiss her on the forehead, switch off the light then pull the ornate door shut behind me.

In an instant, I am standing at the edge of the lake. The rain-pregnant clouds cast sinister shadows across its surface. The house looms on the hill behind me like a living, breathing beast sucking the oxygen from the air until I struggle for breath. I want to run but tendrils of darkness twist around me like invisible bonds. I sweep my gaze across the dark and murky water. A few metres out, something splashes and slaps about in frantic motion. I steel myself as a shriek pierces the night, stunning the chirping insects into silence. Shards of moonlight cut through the shadows, and I see her blonde head go under for an instant. The water churns. A growing circle of ripples bears straight for me as she comes up with a guttural cry that turns me to stone. 'Mummeeee! Help!' She gives me one more wide-eyed look before going under for the final time. I look down and I see her blood on my hands. I stand rooted beneath the flaking paperbark trees, feeling my own skin shedding into the discarded mire.

Like sickening punches, the memories leave me winded and the new therapist waits for me to catch my breath and continue.

‘The nightmare,’ she imposes on my thoughts, ‘do you know what may have triggered it, Florence? Has anything different happened this week?’

Of course I know what triggered it. It is exactly one year since Charlie disappeared. The memory lodges in the back of my throat, rendering me speechless and I wrap my arms around myself. I shake my head slowly. Has she even read the case notes?

I avert my gaze and stare out of the smudged office window. The houses encroach upon each other down the narrow suburban street, as they do in my identical street just a few blocks away. Not long ago, I lived in a very different place. I close my eyes and try to escape into more pleasant memories.

It is our first anniversary and Justin presents me with a trinket box. Inside is an old-fashioned brass key. He meets my inquisitive smile with a mischievous grin. ‘I have to take you somewhere.’

I am unable to sit still as we drive away from town. I take a quick peek at the key while Justin focuses on the road ahead. After driving for ten minutes, he pulls into an elegant driveway lined by poplar trees and steps on the brake. In the distance, I can see a stone house sprawled along a small rise like a grand lady at rest. I turn toward him, wide-eyed.

He takes my hand in his. ‘It’s ours,’ he says and raises my hand to his lips.

As he accelerates the car slowly down the drive, I open the window and draw in the perfume of freshly cut grass. I crinkle my nose. I can barely believe it. No more living in two small cramped rooms at his sister’s house. ‘Just until I’m established in my job,’ he’d said when we came here four months ago. I had imagined more of a backwater calm, with meandering roads and open green spaces, and now here it is. The breeze whistles through the poplar trees, agitating their leaves into welcoming waves. He stops the car at the front of the house and we step up to the heavy door.

‘You do the honours.’

I lift the key from the box, my hand trembling. The smell of fresh paint and new carpets hits me as the door swings open into a high-ceilinged entrance hall decked out in my favourite hues of cream and rich chocolate brown. ‘W-when? How?’

‘I wanted to surprise you. I can’t wait to see what Charlie thinks of her new room. But first, I have something special to show you.’

He takes my hand and draws me down the wide flagstone hall then up a narrow timber staircase. A carved sign on the door reads *Flow’s Studio*. I open the door and the first thing my eye focuses on is how he has painstakingly set up my easel and paints. Tingles ripple up my arms in waves and propel me further into the room. My eyes sweep beyond a wall of glass and as the pleasurable waves wash back, they drag at me with an undertow that threatens to topple me. I stare stony-faced out the window. At the bottom of the hill is an enormous expanse of water.

‘What do you think?’ He hasn’t noticed my reaction. ‘It was just a storage attic but I had the picture window specially installed. I thought you would just love this view of the lake.’

I take a deep breath and force a smile to my lips. ‘It’s wonderful.’ I turn away from the water and hug him tightly, praying he won’t feel my racing heart.

Ebb

It is dark; the kind of shadowy darkness where something lurking in the bushes might eat you up if you aren’t careful. You try to keep close behind Daddy’s silhouette, focussing on your small shadow formed by the street lamp light but his hulking shadow eats it up too. It is deathly quiet except for the slapping sound of the waves as the breeze pushes them against the sides of the exposed concrete boat ramp. You breathe in salty air as you try to catch your breath. Slick mud glistens in the thin sliver of light like the trails that the snails leave on the path to Mummy’s garden at home. You try to take your father’s hand but he pushes you away roughly and snaps at you. His words are sharp but you focus on the tone of his voice. Not angry. Just firm. You obey by running ahead down the ramp as he thrusts the small timber dinghy through the mud.

‘Watch out,’ he calls in a tone marred by annoyance. ‘You’ll slip!’

You look back defiantly, your feet skidding to a stop in the mud. ‘I won’t slip.’

Stopping is a big mistake. Your feet leave you and you fling your arms into the air to try to regain your balance. As your body tilts, you see the last twinkle of the evening star against a lightening horizon. Your feet are sliding faster now, down the ramp. You land heavily, still sliding. Down into the muddied water that waits to suck you under. You gasp and take in a mouthful of the brackish water as you try to pull your foot free from the thick mud’s grip.

Through your splutters comes a booming noise. Daddy’s voice, and the anger in it makes you shudder. You squeeze your hands over your ears and brace yourself for the blow but it doesn’t come as the current suddenly drags you from the mud and carries you away from his voice. Your relief is short-lived. A shrill scream makes you look up. The last thing you see before the current drags you under is Mummy waving her arms from the top of the boat ramp. Silhouetted by the street lamp, she looks like a glowing angel flapping her wings. You want to stretch out your arms for her but you can’t move. The cold water churns you into its murky depths and you can’t work out which way is up. It feels like the Little Drummer Boy has been set loose in your chest. You open your mouth to scream. You... can’t... breathe. You close your eyes and feel yourself sinking.

You wake spluttering. Rough hands roll you over to your side and you heave until yucky-tasting liquid oozes from your mouth. Your nose burns. You are lying in the bottom of the dinghy and your father looms over you laughing; a loud belly laugh, soaking you in humiliation until you feel as small as the periwinkle shell that is digging into your thigh. You don’t look at him so you can hide your welling tears. He

steers the dinghy back to the ramp then plucks you from it with his large hands. He holds you away from him as you drip muddy water and misery, as if you are trash he is about to dump in the nearest bin. You blink hard. Tears will just anger him again. He carries you to the top of the ramp then drops you on the gravel in front of your mother's feet.

She brushes her hand through your wet hair and shakes her head. ‘Oh, sweetheart. Why do you have to make Daddy so angry?’

You turn away from her disappointed look. As you do, you catch the sharp glint of the waves in the dawn sun. Every muscle in your tiny body stiffens. You can’t breathe again. The tears that threaten to overwhelm you freeze in the corners of your eyes. ‘Please Mummy,’ you beg, shying away from the water. ‘I want to go home.’

Flow

The therapist flicks through the case notes. ‘It says here you have aquaphobia?’

‘For as long as I can remember’. Swimming lessons at school were enough to launch me into tachycardia but the thought of being in open water could send my heart into overdrive. ‘It’s ironic really’, I continue, almost talking to myself. ‘My husband had a love for the water, a feel for it, that was almost as big as his love for me. He nicknamed me Flow, F-L-O-W, kind of a private joke between us’. He could never have lived in that town for one minute if it was not for that lake. His seafaring heart would pine for the water as much as mine feared it. I had always been able to avoid the water by proposing he make it his exclusive boy’s hobby. I have my art, so it worked for me. ‘I had just never imagined living so close to it. He never knew about my aquaphobia’.

‘Do you think that this fear might have triggered the nightmare?’

I shrug my shoulders. ‘Anyway, this isn’t about me. It’s about *her*.’

She nods. ‘I’ve been thinking,’ she says, pausing as if she is looking for the right words. She flicks through the case notes in front of her then swallows. ‘You might think this is a bit unorthodox, but what if we took a trip back to the lake?’

The vision from my nightmare reels back into view and I stare, horrified. She waits for me to digest the idea.

We can never go back. Not to the lake, or to the town that stole my innocent daughter and my loving husband from me. I shake my head. ‘I don’t think that would be a good idea.’

‘Well, just give it some thought,’ she says in a gentle tone. ‘Sometimes the only way to escape the ghosts is to confront them.’

* * *

The sun sneaks above the horizon, breaking the morning hush. A chorus strikes up as the light steals through a wispy band of clouds and forms a kaleidoscope of patterns across the lake. A bird swoops down, scooping up an insect then flurries off to feed its hungry chick. The stone house stands in timeless silence, witness to the eternal circle of life below.

I open my eyes as kookaburras sound the first alarm of the day, and peer at the clock. Justin breathes evenly beside me. Slipping out of bed, I pad down the hall toward Charlie's room. I tiptoe over to her bed, my heart swelling. I enjoy these delicious moments when I can breathe her in before she wakes and becomes a cannonball of questions and frenetic energy. My eyes narrow. Charlie is not in her bed. It's not like her to be up this early. I stoop to look under the bed but she is not hiding there. My skin tightens as I glance out the window toward the lake. I tear up the covers but there is only a slight indentation where she has slept. I run the top of my palm against the sheets. They are cold. Ice fills my veins as I stare at the pale pink sheet then back to the lake.

I am being irrational. I try to slow my breathing. Those raucous kookaburras probably woke her up too. 'Charlie!'

My voice echoes down the empty hall. 'Charlie, where are you sweetheart?' Slightly quieter this time, trying not to wake Justin. He had worked late into the night again. Edging down the hall, I avoid looking out the window as I enter the playroom. The glint of the morning sun on the lake still has the ability to unhinge me even though we have lived in this house for almost three months.

'Charlie,' I call softly as I make my way back into the hall. 'Time to get ready for school.' I miss her now she is away for full days at prep but, if I am honest, I have also been enjoying the extra time to paint.

I check the bathroom then make my way further down the hall. 'Charlie?'

There is no sign of her in the living room either. Annoyance creeps into my voice. 'Charlie, I hope you're not on that computer!' I push the study door open quickly, hoping to catch her in the act but the room is empty.

'Charlie?' My voice has risen again. It is such a big house with so many places for a small inquisitive girl to explore. Or hide. Maybe she is trying to avoid school. Has something bad happened there?

Movement catches my eye from the kitchen. I step into the sunny room then my gaze locks on the door into the back garden.

Flap. Flap.

'Oh God, no!' The words hang on my tongue as my gaze shifts to the lake. Time seems to stop, despite the ticking of the clock becoming louder in the still room.

The door flaps again and regaining my senses, I start running. Sweeping the back garden in circles; calling her name; crawling into her usual play spots; gazing up into

the trees for any sign of contrasting colour. I turn toward the lake. My heart hammers in my chest. *No! She must be here somewhere.*

I clasp clammy hands over my head, shuddering as visions swamp me of my sweet baby girl floating face down on the surface of the lake, or worse, her tiny body being dragged down into its unfathomable depths. ‘*Char-lie!*’ The screech seems to be coming from far off then I realise it is my own voice. It spills from my lips then gushes toward the lake but I am rooted to the spot like the giant ghost gum that stands sentinel over me.

Justin manifests behind me. ‘Flow? What is it? What’s wrong?’

I can’t find my voice.

He touches my shoulder and it jolts me from my stupor. ‘I...I can’t find Charlie,’ I sob, dropping to the ground.

‘She must be here somewhere,’ Justin says in a soothing voice. He follows my line of sight toward the lake. ‘She knows not to go anywhere near the water.’

My body begins to shake.

‘Come on,’ Justin coaxes. ‘Come back to the house and I’ll look for her.’

I shake my head in a fierce arc as my fear transforms into anger. *You did this. You brought us here.* I am unable to voice the words. Justin pulls me up into his arms and guides me back to the kitchen table. I hear him systematically moving from room to room, calling Charlie’s name. My eyes have not left the lake. I crack my knuckles down one hand, my mind filled with visions of my child in a watery grave.

‘She’s not in here,’ Justin says when he arrives back. Is his nonchalant tone for my sake? Why isn’t he concerned? *Because Charlie isn’t his daughter.*

‘I’m going to look outside’. He stops when he hears the crack of my knuckle as I begin on my other hand. ‘Don’t do that to yourself. You know it gives me the creeps.’

I cross my arms, avoiding his scornful eye. ‘It doesn’t hurt.’ My step-father used to ride me about it too.

He hovers. ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘Just find my little girl.’ I yearn to jump up and follow him but my body is glued to the chair. Most people are born with an inbuilt fight or flight instinct. I was born with neither.

Ebb

I won’t slip...ziiip!’ Daddy draws out the last word, followed by one of his huge belly laughs. You squeeze your eyes shut and wish that your small rocking chair is magic like the one in your Enid Blyton novel and it will whisk you off to some far away land.

‘You are such a stupid child!’

You rock back and forth, increasing speed. The chair tips and you crash into the coffee table, flailing arms and legs.

Your father grabs you by one arm and lifts you toward him. ‘Get to your room!’ You feel his spittle spray across your face. ‘I can’t stand the sight of you.’ He drops you and you crash back to the hard timber floor.

Your mother scrambles to pick you up and ushers you toward your room. Moments later the yelling starts. It surges down the hall and floods through the gap of your open bedroom door.

‘She’s your bloody child, why don’t you learn to control her,’ your father bellows.

You slam the door but it doesn’t block out the rage in his voice. You pull the covers over your head but you still hear him. ‘Can’t you do anything right, woman? You’re an idiot.’ There is a slur in his voice. ‘No wonder that kid of yours is so stupid. Argh...’ You know what’s coming next. ‘I’m living with a bunch of morons!’ Something smashes against the wall and you curl your legs up under your chin. Squeezing your pillow around your ears, you open your latest Enid Blyton novel and for a while you are transported to a faraway land. He can’t hurt you here.

You wish for a father who loves you as much as Laura Ingalls’ father does in your favourite TV show ‘Little House on the Prairie’. One who hugs you, brings you gifts and tucks you into bed with a loving smile and a story. He would have built you a wooden doll’s house and bought you the puppy you always wanted and let it sleep on the end of your bed.

Your father’s voice booms again, shattering your perfect family romance. He doesn’t want you here. You could run away. Come on, right now! What does it matter where you go? Anywhere is better than here. Maybe you could find your real father, the one who left before he knew about you. He might want you and your mother to live with him.

This family isn’t real. You would both be better off without your step-father. You could just put a pillow over his head and smother him in his sleep.

Flow

Justin bursts through the door, taking big gulps of air to catch his breath. I look up at the clock and I am shocked to see that he has been gone for forty-five minutes. ‘Did you find her?’

‘I’ve been right along the shore of the lake to both property boundaries.’ He pants between his words. ‘She’s not there. I’ve sent Jeremy and Paul out to search the rest of the property in the ute.’

I jump up and grip the back of the chair. ‘You sent the gardeners out to look for my little girl?’ I can hear the crescendo rising in my voice, but I can no longer control it. ‘Why aren’t you still out there looking for her? Don’t you even care about her? Is it because she’s not yours?’

Justin's facial features appear to drop in the wake of my wrath, then tighten into defensiveness. 'Of course I do. I just thought the more people out looking for her, the quicker we're going to find her. I'm going to drive down to Bill and Marjorie's and see if they can have a look around their place. You never know, she might have just wandered down there to see the puppies.'

As he leaves, a noise startles me. I dash up the hall to Charlie's bedroom. Swinging open the door, I rip up the covers, squat to look under the bed, rip her clothes from their coat hangers as I search the closet. I cover the whole house over; looking in all of the small spaces that Charlie could be hiding. 'Come on Charlie,' I call. 'It's not funny anymore. You have to go to school whether you want to or not.' I will not let myself believe that she is gone. I do the rounds of the house again. My hopes dashed, I drop to my knees in the middle of the hall with my head in my hands.

I hear the creak of the front door and whip my head up. It is only Justin. Concern crinkles his face. He points toward the kitchen and just leaves me sitting on the cold stone floor. I cannot blame him after the way I have spoken to him. I hear him making calls to the other neighbours. An eerie quiet follows then the shrill ring of the telephone echoes down the hall. 'Thanks anyway, Jeremy,' Justin says. He walks down the hall and squats in front of me, running his hands through his greying hair. I notice that he has not taken the time to style it this morning. He cares more than I have given him credit.

'I'm sorry, Flow. Nobody's seen her.' He pauses, his brown eyes reflecting the panic in mine. 'I think it's time to call the police.'

Research statement

Research background

This research adopts the challenge of using narrative to mirror the complexity of traumatic images and sensations in crime fiction by creating a hybrid novel that moves beyond the prevailing conventions of crime fiction and incorporates the narrative benefits of trauma literature. These benefits include reconnection, catharsis and empathy (Herman 1992). The creative work, situated in the crime sub-genre of mystery, explores the separation between the negative and positive sectors of the personality, which Firman and Gila (1997) claim is a function of traumatic disruptions in significant relationships in childhood through abuse and neglect- referred to as the 'primal wound'. Rowan (1990) suggests this type of subpersonality, which is semi-permanent and semi-autonomous, is capable of acting as a person and this concept is drawn upon to formulate the crime plot.

Research contribution

Whitehead (2004: 3) suggests trauma literature 'novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms'. Narrative strategies common to trauma literature such as repetition (mirroring, motifs) and fragmentation (prolepsis, analepsis) are aligned with crime fiction strategies (red herrings, hooks, cliff hangers) to develop an original hybrid

creative work. No evidence has been located to date for research or genre crime fiction that attempts to align the narrative design of trauma literature and crime fiction with the purpose of providing benefits to trauma survivors. This research aims to develop a framework to classify such creative works, as a subset of trauma literature.

Research significance

Recent studies presented by Eaglestone et al (2014) highlight the visibility and impact of traumatic events in modern life. The significance of this research is that the hybrid novel may offer opportunities for crime fiction readers and writers from an expansive audience to work through and come to terms with traumatic events.

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