

Flinders University

Amy T Matthews

'Lion Hunt: turning family stories into magic realist fiction'

Abstract:

Two steps on the water is a magic realist novel, inspired by my ex-husband's family stories. By nature, family stories tend to acquire a mythic quality and this effect is heightened when they are not your family's stories, but someone else's. The fact that I was a city girl and the other family lived on a series of farms, moving from Two Wells, to Calomba, to Mallala, to Gawler River, traversing the plains as they changed from pig farming to horse breaking, added to the exoticism of their lives. Over the course of seventeen years, I heard their stories many times over (stories about escaped lions, boys drowning in wheat silos and great white sharks exhibited in the back of fridge trucks down at the local pub), and they became vivid in my imagination, integrated into my own conception of the Plains north of Adelaide.

'Lion hunt' is a scene inspired by the lion that escaped from the Two Wells Lion Park in the late 1970s. From their farm, my ex-husband's family could hear the lion roaring as it stalked the sheep on the plains. My father-in-law packed his two young sons into the car and went out hunting it. What he thought he'd do if he found it, I don't know. I appropriated their story, weaving a novel from fragments of their oft-told tales, in an attempt to mythologise a contemporary Australian landscape that is often read as 'banal.' This is part of a larger project, concerned with Australian fiction and its fascination with realism and how, as a writer, I can render Australian landscapes fantastic.

Biographical note:

Dr Amy T. Matthews is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Flinders University and a member of the JM Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice. She has published short stories in collections including *Best Australian Stories*, and was long-listed for the *Australian/Vogel* literary award. Her novel *End of the night girl* won the 2010 Adelaide Festival Unpublished Manuscript Award, was published by Wakefield Press in 2011, and was shortlisted for the 2012 Dobbie Literary Award and the 2012 Colin Roderick Award. Her latest book *Navigating the kingdom of night* is published by Adelaide University Press.

Keywords:

Australian fiction – magic realism – Adelaide in fiction – family stories

It was the first time Will had been in the house since his father's death. He drifted towards the door to the living room. The hospital bed was gone, and furniture had moved back to where it belonged. Only it didn't quite seem to belong anymore. The floral couch was marooned in the middle of the carpet, the armchairs a little too squarely placed. The room looked abandoned.

He entered, his footsteps a whisper on the cloud-coloured carpet. There were indents where the wheels of the hospital bed had been. Thick afternoon sunlight fell through the filmy scrim; it swirled with dust motes and made Will feel as though he was underwater. He swam through the warm light until he reached the photos on the mantle. His mother had lined them up in a military row, so the frames were shoulder to shoulder: gappy Sean, Will and the dogs, and the bleached-out shot of the two of them and their father on the night of the lion hunt.

It wasn't a good photo, Will thought, picking it up. Ashley's dad had taken it and the flash lit them up chalk-white against the blackboard of the night sky. Sean and Will were in the back of the ute; Sean looked startled by the flash, his mouth half-open and his eyes half-closed, while Will was looking anxiously at the man behind the camera.

It had been a mad thing to do, standing out there in the field to take a photo when they could hear the lion so close. The whole night was mad. Bizarre and terrifying and, in memory, utterly fantastic.

Will looked at his father in the photograph. He was behind the wheel, one arm resting on the open window, his head cocked and his eyes gleaming in the flare of the camera. He'd loved it, the whole thing, tearing over the plains, listening to wild rumble of the animal. And, thinking back to the night spent bouncing around in the tray of the ute, in retrospect Will loved it too.

The lion came from Lower Light. A man named Foy had a menagerie by the sea, where the sand was wet and thick and the seaweed sliced through flesh like razor wire. Foy's menagerie was illegal and the animals were thin and angry.

It was on a sharp August night when the lion found a way through the fence. He ran into the wind, away from the salt air, inland to the hills, towards the rich and fleshy smell of livestock. It gathered strength as it ran and, by the time it reached the heart of the plains, it began to roar. Soon, the hunt was on.

'Don't wake your mother,' Andy whispered as he woke Will and Sean.

'What's happening?'

'It's a surprise,' Andy said, still whispering. 'Get dressed.'

Will and Sean exchanged looks.

'What time is it?'

'Late. Hurry. I'll meet you in the ute.'

They could hear him shuffling around the kitchen as they dressed and, when they got to the ute, they saw he had a couple of thermoses and a bag of chips on the seat next

to him. Like they were going on a picnic.

'What's going on?' Sean asked Will.

'Beats me.'

They climbed into the tray of the ute and pulled a horse blanket over themselves. It was freezing. The sky was clear and distant, cold with stars, and the air was sharp in their lungs. They rattled down the drive and, as they turned onto the dirt road, their dad hit the pedal and cold wind whipped at the sides of the ute.

Lights were on at the Hartleys' so Andy pulled in to see if Rob and Jason wanted to come along. They were all standing out the front of the house, staring into the darkness.

'You heard, then?' Andy called as he pulled over.

'Where on earth do you think you're going?' Lynne demanded, her hands curled like claws around Jason's shoulders.

'To have a look. Want to come?'

'Bloody oath. Just let me get my jacket. Come on, Jase.'

'Over my dead body.' Lynne jerked Jason back against her. The boy looked miserably at Will and Sean.

'They'll be perfectly safe,' Andy said.

'Does Kath know what you're doing?'

'Didn't think there was much point in waking her.'

Will could tell by the thin line of Mrs Hartley's lips she'd be on the phone to his mother the minute they left. He wondered what she was petrified of. But then a deep-bellied roar sounded from the western plains; it started low and gained power, rising into the sky like a mushroom cloud, expanding as it went.

Sean grabbed at Will, who felt him shaking. Will didn't blame him. His own stomach had crawled up his throat at the sound of it.

'Come on, mate,' Andy hollered to Rob, 'or the fun'll be over before we get there.'

'Rob!' Lynne snapped at her husband, but it was no use. Rob grabbed his jacket and his camera and was out the door. Andy was driving off before the passenger door closed.

From their position in the tray, Will and Sean had a clear view of Mrs Hartley's white face as they drove away. Jason gave them a half-hearted wave.

Over the snapping of the wind, Will could just make out the sound of the radio in the cab; it was tuned into AM and he could make out the odd word. There was something about a lion. He looked out at the starlit plains and wondered nervously if a lion could outrun a car.

It would probably eat Sean first, he reasoned. Young meat was better, wasn't it? People preferred veal to beef, and lamb to mutton, after all.

They took the back roads, through fields sprouting Lucerne, smelling of dirt and something new, something wild. It was as though the presence of the lion had woken something in the earth, something old and throbbing with excitement. The air around Will sparkled with it. His heart raced as the ute flew over the roughly graded roads, trailing dust which glowed milk-white in the starlight. There was no moon and the darkness was a breathing thing around them, viscous as oil, and cold.

The disembodied roar came again, deep in the plains, closer to the hills, and Andy jerked the ute onto a side road, nosing the car in the direction of the cry.

'What does Dad want to do?' Sean asked nervously. He sat hard up against Will.

Will shrugged but he had a vague idea what his dad was doing. His dad was trying to ride the slipstream; there was an energy simmering, rising in the wake of the lion. The stalks in the fields lifted their heads, spines crackling, as it passed. Livestock bleated and lowed, and huddled together, eyes rolling over and flanks quivering. The new scent on the wind called to Andy. Will felt it too. Every hair on his body stood on end, his blood rasping through his veins. Restlessness seized him and he wanted nothing more than to run, to jump from the ute and tear along the roads, or better yet, through the sprouting fields, his sneakers sinking into the moist earth.

A muffled percussive noise whickered from the direction of the city. Will turned and saw distant searchlights scything the night: helicopters, two of them, probably from the news. His dad sped. Will felt his urgency in the rattle of the tray and the smattering of pebbles ricocheting off the sides of the ute.

There was a new sound now, a low *hunk-hunk-hunk*. Will's flesh crawled.

His dad pulled over to the side of the road and killed the engine. Will could hear them all breathing hard, as though they had been running. They sat in the darkness, listening to the sounds coming from the animal's deep chest, and the distant rotors of the helicopters. *It's here*. Will felt Sean take his hand; his brother's skin was cold and damp.

'Boys,' Andy said softly, opening the door with a click, 'get in the cab.'

They didn't need to be asked twice. They scrambled over the lip of the tray and into the cab next to Rob.

'What are you doing?' Will said when his dad closed the door behind them.

'Wind the window up,' was all his dad said.

Will watched in disbelief as his old man stood in the middle of the dirt road, alone and exposed.

'The window,' his dad snapped, turning to face the field. Two yellow eyes blinked into existence in the darkness. Will had read about eyes glowing like lamps but had never really thought it could be true. But there it was: two great yellow lamps, flickering like flames in a breeze.

Will furiously wound the window up.

'Jesus Christ,' Rob breathed.

The lion emerged from the Lucerne, an enormous length of amber muscle. As it walked, it flicked its tail. When it connected with the stalks there was a snapping sound. In one fluid movement it leapt the wire fence and landed on the pale dirt of the road. Its paws were as big as Sean's head.

There, on the edge of the road, the lion paused, its great yellow eyes fixed on Andy. Will's dad stared back. Will's ears rushed with blood; it was all he could hear, as though he was submerged in water.

He couldn't breathe. What was his father going to do?

What was the lion going to do?

Neither of them did anything. Both stood immobilised, staring deep inside the other's gaze.

Then a searchlight, blinding, swept the road to the south and the lion looked away. And when it looked back at Andy it swept him with an angry glare, incisors bared.

Will felt a rush of warmth and knew Sean had pissed himself. The seat was wet, the piss turning cold almost immediately. His own bowels felt loose and he trembled with his brother as they watched the lion advance on their father. It kept its head low, its eyes on his face, its long back muscles rippling as it walked. Rob caught his breath.

Andy didn't flinch. He stood still, his own muscles visibly taut beneath his jumper. The animal uttered a low growl, deep in its throat. Will reached for the door release, but Rob grabbed at his hand. 'Don't be an idiot.'

The lion circled Andy, never once dropping its gaze. Its maw remained open and its lips drawn. Andy let it circle.

Do something.

The lion snorted and leaned its weight against Andy as it circled a second time. Andy absorbed the weight of it, leaning imperceptibly. At the end of its second circle the lion kept walking, back towards the Lucerne. It raised its tail as it walked, showing the tiny round darkness of its arsehole. It leapt the fence with the same fluidity, and disappeared into darkness. A moment later they heard the rumbling *hunk-hunk-hunk*, followed by an ear-splitting roar.

His dad was still standing there in the middle of the road, facing the black field. It was only as helicopters flew over, blinding lights and syncopated rotors, that he seemed to come to himself. He turned to the ute, looked surprised to see the boys there. He grinned.

'Toss us the thermos, mate,' he said to Rob.

'Which one?'

'The silver. The other one's for the boys.'

Gingerly, Rob climbed out of the cab, looking over Andy's shoulder the whole time. He handed the thermos over and wiped at his upper lip.

'How do you know it won't be back?'

'I don't.' Andy took a deep draught and passed the thermos to Rob.

'This better not be lemonade.'

'Will.' Sean tugged on Will's arm.

'What?' Will didn't look away from his dad. He'd never seen his father look like this before, elevated, like he was floating an inch off the ground.

'I wet myself.'

'Yeah, I felt it, you spaz.'

'What'll Dad say?'

Will sighed. He reached for the thermos. He unscrewed the cap and sniffed it. It smelled more like sugar than tea. His dad was heavy handed with sugar.

'Lift your bum off the seat,' he ordered, 'I don't want to burn you.' Then he upended the sugary tea.

'You spaz!' he shouted at the top of his voice. 'Dad! Sean spilled the tea.'

'So clean it up!' And there was their usual father back again, his heels firmly planted on the road, his scowl back in place.

Will cleaned it up with the horse blanket, which he knew his dad would make him wash in the morning.

'Thanks, Will,' Sean whispered.

'You're washing the blanket.'

Sean nodded vigorously, but Will knew he wouldn't.

They got back in the tray and waited for Andy and Rob to finish whatever was in their thermos. Rob was a little flushed when he demanded to take a photo.

'Get behind the wheel,' he ordered Andy, giving him a shove towards the ute. 'Right boys, that's it.'

As Rob stood at the side of the road, fumbling to work the camera, the lion roared again. It didn't sound too far away. Will searched the darkness behind Rob, who barely flinched. Ashley's dad was loose now, confident the adventure was over. Will wouldn't have been him for quids, with his back to the darkness.

'Hurry up,' he muttered, and he felt Sean inch closer.

The flash exploded, catching them unawares.

'Now you take one of me.' Rob handed Andy the camera.

'How do I work it?'

'I dunno, it's Lynne's. Just press the button.' Rob posed against the fence post, looking as smug as a big game hunter, and more than a little drunk. The flash popped and he blinked and grinned.

'Good one.' He took the camera and climbed back in the ute. As they bumped home along the pale roads they watched the searchlights swinging through the night.

On the news the next day they showed the lion carcass and talked to the men who had shot it. It was a sad looking animal; its fur dusty and patchy. Its ribcage showed clearly through its hide. Will saw the way his father's face turned to stone as he watched shots of the lion being circled by photographers. It had been shot as it ate a sheep. Rusty blood stained its mane and muzzle. The images on the television seemed a million miles from the night before, with its icy sky and pure air, with the rush of wind and the wild primal roar of the lion. The dead thing on the news was small and sad and made Will feel awful. He guessed if it had to die, he was glad the lion had died free, with hot blood in its belly.

His dad snapped the television off, and Will knew he was thinking the same.

Research statement

Research background

A city such as London has been represented in a multiplicity of ways: in realist detail in the novels of Dickens (such as descriptions of the city in *Great Expectations*); magically in texts such as *Peter Pan*; ecstatically and poetically in the works of Virginia Woolf (the streets flowing like rivers in *Mrs Dalloway*); with grit and sweat and verisimilitude in historical fiction by writers such as Hilary Mantel, with the Tudor period in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the bodies*, and Sarah Waters, with the Victorian period (*Tipping the velvet* and *Fingersmith*) and World War Two (*The night watch*); and with the darkly supernatural edge of urban fantasy in Neil Gaiman's fiction (*Neverwhere*). The result of this multiplicity is that London exists as an imagined city, as well as a real city. It becomes a fantasy space, as well as an actual space, one that exists in the minds of readers (who can simultaneously hold multiple iterations of the city in their heads when they think of 'London'). This is not true of Adelaide and the landscapes around Adelaide; most fictional representations of South Australia have been realist in mode and I argue this has kept Adelaide from being an imagined city as well as a real city.

Research contribution

'Lion hunt' is an excerpt from a novel, *Two steps on the water*, one of a series of creative works seeking to represent Adelaide and the landscapes around it in a multiplicity of ways. This work operates in the magic realist mode and attempts to render the 'banality' of the Adelaide Plains magical, to admit the plains to the imagination in a manner that renders them mythic, rather than purely realist.

Research significance

The significance of this work is that it is part of a body of work that represents Adelaide and surrounding landscapes in a variety of literary styles and genres. It works in synergy with the artist's critical writing about previous fictional representations of Adelaide. The novel seeks to defamiliarise Adelaide in ways that are uncommon in existing fictional representations of the city and its surrounds. The artist's previous (postmodern) novel chose to blend grunge, chick lit and gritty historical fiction (with a slight edge of magic realism), rendering Adelaide in realist

detail but without the comfort of a realist plot or structure. This work refers to some of the same landscapes, but in a style that is hyper-real and mythic.

List of works cited

- Barrie, James M 1988 *Peter Pan*, London: Magnet Classic
- Dickens, Charles 2004 *Great expectations*, New York: Pocket
- Gaiman, Neil 1997 *Neverwhere*, New York: Avon
- Mantel, Hilary 2009 *Wolf Hall*, New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Mantel, Hilary 2012 *Bring up the bodies*, New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Waters, Sarah 1999 *Tipping the velvet*, New York: Riverhead
- Waters, Sarah 2002 *Fingersmith*, New York: Riverhead
- Waters, Sarah 2006 *The night watch*, New York: Riverhead
- Woolf, Virginia 1925 *Mrs Dalloway*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co.