

Curtin University

Katrin Den Elzen

Ticking the box

Abstract:

This creative piece, *Ticking the Box*, is a short memoir depicting my grief as a young widow and portraying aspects of the journey of recovery from that loss. The opening scene shows having to tick the box ‘widowed’ for the first time on an official form shortly after my husband’s death and then explores my response to the unwanted identity of ‘young widow’. This includes the first solo visit for dinner at the home of a befriended couple, conveying the awkwardness felt by all. A flashback takes the reader back to when my husband and I first met each other in Egypt, where we were both traveling as young backpackers. It depicts the first days spent together against the stunning backdrop of the temples in Luxor and concludes with the buying of an artefact, which now sits on my bedside table, a tangible connection to the past. The text explores how to integrate the memories of the past, of twenty years spent together, into the future in a way that offers the past as well as the future its own space. This work explores issues of identity, grief and premature loss. It recognises the dead as vulnerable subjects and strives for an ethical representation of the deceased.

Biographical note:

Katrin Den Elzen holds an MPhil and currently undertakes a PhD in Creative Writing at Curtin University, which entails a creative component and an accompanying exegesis. She is writing a grief memoir about the loss of her husband and the rebuilding of her life and identity. Her exegesis investigates how memoirists textually negotiate the experience of young widowhood, and specifically, how they rebuild the fragmented self in the text. Katrin has presented papers at conferences of the International Auto/biography Association as well as other conferences and symposia. Her academic articles have appeared in *TEXT* and *Life Writing* and her creative work has been anthologised overseas.

Keywords:

Memoir – grief – fiction – young widow

I am leaning against a worn, grey, laminated counter at the Social Security office, staring at the form in front of me. I am asked to tick the marital status box: *married, divorced, single, widowed?* My tears drop onto the paper, blurring and smudging the printed words. The box marked *widowed* remains in pristine condition.

A widow at forty? Is that the box I now inhabit?

Widowhood is alien to me. It has been dumped into my unwilling lap and rests there uneasily. It is a label that hangs off me like a pair of oversized overalls. It is a label used to describe *old* women with faint moustaches in Mediterranean villages who wear black for the rest of their lives, thus denoting to the rest of the world, and themselves, their now permanent status as widow. It is a label that I refuse. But is it as simple as that? Labels are rarely consciously chosen but imposed on us by others. Can I just say, no that's not who I am? I don't even know who I am. I've lost myself in the terrain of a surreal landscape that I can neither recognise nor read.

I sigh and tick the box in black biro. It is a solid mark. I am beginning to grasp that there is no easy way either to inhabit or to refute this alien box, to capture what I am feeling, or who I might be.

I am fatigued after months of daily hospital visits, where life had hovered. Exhaustion has curled up in my bones. The initial period following my loss is marked by impenetrable grief. It infuses every cell of my body, inflames every nerve and dendrite. The finality, the never ever again, is fed by a constant, insatiable stream of reminders. Never again will we all sit together at the dinner table, never again will we be a whole family, never again will we laugh together. At home, alone, my body shakes. I fall to my knees.

The force of this intensity has to shrink before I can begin the task of taking in my outer and inner landscape. It refuses to abate. I begin to face my outer landscape first and open myself up to some distraction. I accept a dinner invitation from our friends at their house on Saturday night. The two of them sit on one side of the table across from me, the space between them humming with intimacy. Should I stay on the left or should I shuffle into the middle to fill the space? The empty spot next to me expands. The conversation falters, repeatedly. The palpable absence of Mark's ready banter and his wit, delivered at lightning speed with his eyebrows raised so slightly as to be barely noticeable, hangs thick in the space between us. I leave early, curl up into a ball under my doona and wrap my arms firmly around my shins, tucking my legs against my chest.

Later, I turn over in bed and lower the doona. I fumble my way in the dark past the polished metal of the desk lamp on my bedside table and in the faint red glow of the digital clock I can make out the scarab artefact nestled amongst a biro and a water bottle. My fingers caress the outline of the carved cold stone, gliding along the smooth ridge on the back that marks the wings of the beetle. As I cradle the small sculpture in both my palms until it gradually gets warmer, with the texture of the hieroglyphs imprinted on the bottom pressing against my skin, my mind wanders to the very beginnings of meeting Mark.

It was a sunny, cool February morning and I was nineteen, standing on a railway platform in Cairo. A trace of mint hung in the air. Various loudspeakers spat out a high-pitched, seesawing male voice; a never-ending prayer. On the other side of the platform, dozens of

uniformed young soldiers waited, many staring in my direction. Despite my black, long-sleeved shirt and long skirt I felt exposed. I looked in another direction and noticed several small groups of backpackers standing at the end of my platform. As I gazed at them, a young Egyptian man, dressed in a clean blue and white striped shirt, approached me. His silver wire-rimmed glasses made him look educated.

“Can I help you with anything, Miss? I work for the railways and you look a little lost.”

At first startled, I pointed towards the backpackers.

“I was wondering, could you help me be seated on the same carriage as they are?”

The man nodded and as the train pulled into the station, I followed him down the platform. Inside the carriage only one person was seated on their own; all the other backpackers were in pairs, chatting. I sat down on the vacant seat next to the young man and received a captivating smile.

“How’re you?” He had a playful sparkle in his eyes.

I took a moment to catch my breath, getting back up and tucking my backpack into the luggage rack above our heads, before saying hello.

“I’m Mark. What’s your name?” He wore a pair of long, white trousers, and a dark green, woollen sleeveless top with a V-neck that showed off well-developed arms. His tanned feet were stuck in plastic thongs.

“I’m Katrin.” I smiled. “Where’re you from?”

“I’m from Australia, Melbourne. And you?” He leaned slightly towards me. “You’re from Germany?”

Transfixed by his bright green eyes, I nodded.

A few stations further on a middle-aged man, a local and the rightful owner of my seat, appeared. I showed him my ticket and tried to explain that I had an allocated seat elsewhere that he could have. He understood and disappeared. I leant back, ready to enjoy the journey and the company.

Mark offered me his window seat and a piece of his stale bread. I commented that he seemed to be the only Westerner travelling on his own. He explained that he never travelled with other people.

“So where’ve you been?” I asked him.

“For the past three months I’ve been on a kibbutz carrying bananas. It was pretty heavy work, but a lot of fun. I met so many people.”

I smiled and looked at him more closely. Physical outdoor work had left him tanned, muscular and glowing, his soft curls bleached light blonde from the sun. Dark brown, perfectly-shaped eyebrows accentuated the brightness of his eyes. I snuggled into my seat, enjoying the view.

For twelve hours we sat chatting. Time condensed. I was not sleepy. Eventually we pulled into Luxor and both of us got ready to leave the train. I had assumed that all the backpackers would be getting off there, the gateway to the Valley of the Kings, home to Tutankhamen’s pharaonic tomb, but to my surprise Mark and I were the only foreigners disembarking. An

exchange of seats had brought us together and now we walked the dusty streets of Luxor side by side, in search of accommodation. In the dark we found a cheap but reasonably clean hotel. In the lobby, an Egyptian man, dressed in a pinstriped white and pale blue shirt and dark blue suit trousers, came over to us. He spoke in impeccable English, but what he had to say did not make sense at all.

“You know, I believe, you two will chase each other around the world.” Mark and I looked at each other bemused.

“No, no, we’re not a couple,” Mark said. “We only just met.”

The man was undeterred. “I’m telling you. You will settle down together and get married,” the man emphasised.

After some laughter, we discovered that the man was a senior pilot for Egypt Air. The figure of this well-educated pilot definitely did not match the wild prophecies he had made. In the lift, Mark winked at me with a swift sideways tilt of his head. I didn’t know then that this was to become one of my favourite intimate gestures.

The morning after arriving in Luxor we made an early start, eager to do some sightseeing. We walked side-by-side to the temple of Luxor, entering through an awe-inspiring massive pylon made up of two tapering towers and stepped into a network of corridors. The temple was deserted but for us. As we wandered along, Mark slipped his hand into mine. Then he kissed me under a pillar covered in hieroglyphs. That afternoon I bought the scarab in an overcrowded market stall at the side of the road amongst a cacophony of voices and the sharp scent of cardamom and cumin.

I place the scarab on the empty pillow next to me. She is barely recognisable now, that young woman who had travelled alone to Egypt, carefree, filled with unquenchable exuberance, swathed in the knowledge of her love, an exciting future luxuriously stretching ahead of her. She could not have known that they would chase each other around the globe and spend twenty years together from the moment they met on the train. And that she would be left behind.

I yearn to hear Mark’s breathing next to me, to break the deafening silence. At this hour even the birds are mute. The memory of the awkward evening I have just spent with our friends, this shaky triangle, rises up. I shiver.

I think about how reclaimed land is never solid enough to withstand the onslaught of the ocean. The water continually finds ways to seep through the foundations of the new buildings. The engineering feat involved in the task of occupying this watery territory with concrete is enormous. It draws on astronomic resources. And in the end, the reclaiming remains uncertain. My marriage, like the ocean, has its place. It is infused into my atoms. My memories propel me forwards, but they cannot form the ground for whatever it is that I might forge from here. That would be to misuse the past as much as the future.

If I really occupy this new box right now, *widow*, then I have to probe this alien landscape and start to find out who I am and who I could be. Will immersion allow me to transcend its rigid containment? I dream of reclaiming a space that bears no resemblance to any box.

Research statement

Research background

Whilst memoir has received significant critical attention, the sub-genre of the grief memoir has seen little scholarly investigation until now. My research investigates what creative non-fiction narrative strategies might be used to represent grief and identity in women's memoirs on young widowhood. Further, it explores ethical issues of writing about the dead; for, as Thomas Couser suggests, the dead might be considered to be the most vulnerable subjects ethically (2003:16).

Research contribution

My research contributes to autobiography and narrative identity studies by identifying and examining the field of the young widow memoir, conceptualised as a sub-genre of the grief memoir. Memoirs concerned with young widowhood are particularly interesting in the way that they raise questions about narrative construction of selfhood, a topic much debated in autobiography studies. In addition, this research contributes to the existing body on the ethics of life writing by employing practice-led research to investigate ethical issues related to representing my deceased husband. I ponder such questions as: should I represent my husband's body so diminished by severe illness and if so how? Should I use real names? This creative work explores issues of identity, vulnerable subjects, grief and premature loss. It asks: Is there a space between homage and theft that allows for ethical representation of the dead through memoir?

Research significance

This research will add to the body of women's life writing and will contribute to the epistemological understanding of women's life writing on grief and young widowhood.

List of works cited

Couser, GT 2003 *Vulnerable subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*, Cornell: Cornell University Press