

## Vic Premier's N-F shortlist

Susan Hampton extract from her memoir 'Anything Can Happen'.

I bought bread at the Demeter Bakery and walked the streets. I was going to poetry gigs in the city at a pub called The Royal Standard. Changing my enrolment from Macquarie Uni to Sydney went smoothly and I started my honours year. In order to live, I was casual teaching. Certain days at uni I was studying sixteenth century poetry, where the rituals of courtly love were so far from my experience of life, it was relaxing.

### Diary 1979

A hot morning, even at eight a.m. I made myself wake up, and "taught" at Balmain High School. In one lesson I was explaining the intellectual history behind The Bishop Orders his Tomb to a Year 12 boy whose essay had 'could of' in part of a sentence. I then had Year 8 and was supposed to take them through a few scenes in A Midsummer Night's Dream. It was impossible. They couldn't see why they were being subjected to something in four-hundred-year-old English about fairies. I went to the Deputy's office and said, 'That Year 8 will be needing you. Don't call me, and I won't call you.'

For many years I'd been telling friends about that day and it went more like this: I went to the Year 8 room and tried to quell the noise. Finally I got them all to sit and some of them listened, but there was a big boy more or less in the centre who was eating lollies out of a bag and running a book on the Melbourne Cup, which was on that afternoon. I would read out about Bottom and Quince and there would be wild giggling about Bottom's name and paper planes being thrown and the boy running the book would be calling out Blue Dream, anyone? and some kids would pass money across. Then the few kids who had been listening to me lost interest and turned their attention to the bookmaker. All this I could stand but then two boys from the back of the room climbed out a window and ran across the oval and jumped into the harbour just near a sign with a shark in a circle and a diagonal line through it. I found I had lifted up a chair and brought it down hard on an empty desk. The legs broke and bits flew everywhere. There was silence. I was so appalled at the fact that I'd lost my temper I just stood there, and the bookmaker said,

Miss. Those bits could've hit someone.

In the eye, Miss, another boy said.

You were just lucky, Miss, a girl said.

This whole scene, the boys swimming gleefully in the harbour, the boy munching lollies and running the book, the smashing of the chair, does not appear in the diary. But then in my telling over the years it gets inserted into the story between the fairies and the going to the Deputy's office where I have quoted myself correctly. 'That Year 8 will be needing you. Don't call me, and I won't call you.'

Yet in reality it seems I may have simply walked out of the room.

To save myself from further confrontations with my perfidy I did not go near the boxes of diaries now but sat and stared at the water.

Today on the surface there were three areas of glitter, proceeding east in three thin strips, in a tide that was speeding up. The tide had now made up its mind and all the water was going the same way.

There were times during the change of the tide when one current of water was coming in, and beside it another current going out. There must exist between these currents a film or membrane of water that is dancing in a kind of stasis to accommodate the two streams.

On quiet days at still water I wait for any puff of wind to jiggle the broken reflections of trees on the peninsula, something I must have done as a kid, at the river. The amnesic haunts of childhood. History, muffled and disordered by repression and time. What we weren't allowed to say, and weren't allowed to know.

There are many ways that unreliability may come about. A person may be born with a nature inclined to deception and fudging and lies. Or they may find their childhood reality banal or lacking in stimulation, and cover it over with wild invention. They may enjoy telling stories, and for want of material, make it up. Or they may find it hard to understand the self and what it is and where it fits, long after others seem to know who they are.

A thunderclap bangs through the upper air and shakes the brick house. Crump, another one, jolting everything. Birds of every local species arc and fly about in crazy patterns yelling at each other. In an animist culture this event would be the very God, and Milton's armies make sense. My thoughts are sparking off at all angles, troupng through religions and historical geographies and loved landscapes and emails from friends. All the air is zinging and now the thunder is rolling towards Avoca and the rain settles to a mild dimpling on the surface of the water.

In the night the Screaming Marys woke me up, first one calling, then the other, plaiting its call through the first one, wild and loud.

The weather calms for a few days and I turn to sit with my back to the estuary, to get the sun. I can tell from the door glass what the tide is doing. All the important things are happening in the reflections. I could be in Plato's cave, where other realities juggle themselves wanting my attention. Why am I writing here? I could be out in the kayak, where it's perfect.

I watch the night come in. Into the silence, the ring of the phone—it's Matthew, one of the best men when Charlotte and I were married a few years back. He lives in the

nearby suburb of Saratoga, and is the person who found us this house. I slide the green button on the screen.

Anything happening? he says.

Eleven spoonbills are standing near the jetty, I said. Completely still. I think some of them are sleeping. They spend a lot of time being still, unlike other birds.

We don't have them here. We have cormorants and seagulls.

We have godwits who are just now leaving for some remote part of Russia.

No need to up the ante. How's your health?

Er—I did wonder.

You're lucky your body is staying so young, I said.

I feel that! It's still strong and healthy. I thought turning sixty would be my death! Anyway, what if my body wants to outlive the rest of me—maybe someone else would like it—I imagine a world where these bodies are seeking inhabitants—it would make a great short story.

It's not the sort of thing I write.

Ah well. But think of it, the person narrating the story in a seemingly neutral voice might turn out to be selling the bodies. And you realise this as you read on.

Yes, that's good. In literary criticism it's called 'the unreliable narrator'.

Oh, it's a thing?

Yeah, it's a thing.