

The power of story: One writer's journey

My love of story began early.

As a child growing up in post-war Melbourne, I lived in two worlds. I roamed the neighbourhood streets with my mates. I had much freedom because my parents were busy making a new life in a new land. My father had been a poet and teacher of Yiddish back in Poland. He would have earned one cent a year doing that here, so he worked in factories and later, at the Victoria market.

On returning home, I entered another world.

English was my parents' sixth language. Yiddish was their mother tongue. As she worked, my mother would sing Yiddish songs she'd performed in Poland before the war, and in his spare time my father would be bent over his beloved Yiddish poets. Late night, from my bed, I heard them in the distant kitchen, talking of Bielsk, Grodek, Orly, Bransk, Bialystok—towns and villages near the Russian-Polish border, where they had spent the first thirty years of their lives.

I would look at photos of aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and I'd ask, "Who are these people? Where are they now?" My father was not talkative in those days. My mother could never tell me what happened to them, but she would wake from a recurring dream crying, "Mama. Mama".

One night, woken by her cries, I crept along the passage to their bedroom and overheard her telling my father she'd had that dream again, of a village on fire, and of running from the flames with her brothers and sisters. One by one they fell until she was the last left running.

My mother would rage: 'I've got a story to tell. No one understands, no one knows who I really am.'

Like the character Josh in my novel *Scraps of Heaven*, I constantly retreated to the streets to escape her rages, but would return, drawn by her fragmented tales, her songs and her passion for life, despite it all.

Years later I undertook a journey to those towns and villages. I returned with the maps of my parents' youth. They opened up a new conversation with my ageing parents. I would sit with my mother at the kitchen table, or with my father in Curtain Square,



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Zable speaks and writes with passion about memory and history, displacement and community. He has conducted numerous writing workshops and has been a visiting lecturer in creative writing at Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, La Trobe and Victoria Universities.

His many books, which tell the immigrant refugee story, are perfect narratives for HSC Belonging.

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the neighbourhood park, and they would tell tales about the streets I had walked.

Many of the stories recounted in *Jewels and ashes*, my memoir of that journey, stem from these conversations. *Jewels and ashes* was an attempt to create a narrative out of fragments, a personal act of restoration. My journey was a quest, and the book an attempt to restore the missing link in the ancestral chain.

This impulse has persisted in my writing.

In *Café Scheherazade*, I was compelled to create a novel out of the tales recounted by the refugees who gathered in this iconic Melbourne cafe.

The fig tree is a collection of true stories that pay homage to my son Alexander's four grandparents, who died before he could know them. In *Scraps of heaven*, I was driven to resurrect the dual worlds of my childhood, and to portray the characters who lived there in the post-war years, when my neighbourhood was composed of immigrants from many lands living beside older generations of Australians.

Sea of Many Returns is a novel based on the many stories I had heard on the island of Ithaca, from where my wife Dora's family come. Many of these tales are contemporary versions of Odysseus, who in ancient times left Ithaca to fight the Trojan wars, and did not return for twenty years.

These modern day voyagers undertake journeys from impoverished Ithaca to distant lands. Their tales echo the tales of many Australians. After all, except for indigenous people, give or take a few generations, we all come from other places throughout the globe.

Violin Lessons

My new book, *Violin lessons*, begins in familiar territory. A young boy plays a violin in the kitchen while his mother sits at the table. It begins in the

hearth, before ranging over countries I have spent time in over the years. Each of the ten tales in *Violin Lessons* are sparked by what Primo Levi called the 'eloquent episode', or Virginia Woolf, 'moments of being.'



For instance, there is the Cambodian fisherman in the tale *The dust of life* who plays the bamboo flute on the Mekong late at night. It's a moment that transcends the madness of the war that was raging over the border in Vietnam.

There is that episode in *The partisan's song* that depicts the young poet, Hirsh Glick, sitting by a makeshift table in a candlelit cellar under the Vilna Ghetto, reciting the poem that would become the anthem of the resistance.

And there is the epic tale of the Iraqi asylum seeker, Amal Basry, which begins with her childhood memory of those Friday afternoons when her father would walk with her by the Tigris River in Baghdad and sing to her the songs of the Arabic diva Umm Khultum.

These episodes are the central thread around which other threads are woven. In the title story, for instance, the story moves from my recent resumption of violin lessons to memories of my childhood music teacher, and to the elderly Naji Cohen, who once played the violin in Baghdad.

In *A chorus of feet*, the percussive tread of Venetians on their way to work, triggers the memories of journeys that take me far beyond the streets of the carless city. Each tale is an exploration, each episode begets new episodes, and each thread contributes to the final tapestry.

Carl Jung, a renowned psychologist said that we all have a story to tell, and to deny it can lead to despair.

This is the storyteller's paradox! ... We recount our own stories or listen to other people's tales... our obligation is to honour the story...

I am drawn to people who are desperate to tell their stories. In putting them into the public domain, I have received letters and emails from readers who tell me they recognise their own stories in mine. I call this process 'the mirror'.

Two examples—

In 1970 young Australians were being conscripted to fight in Vietnam. My birthdate did not come up in the lottery, but I managed to get a journalist's visa from the Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok.

In war-torn Saigon, I met street boys in a refuge set up by an American journalist. Called *the dust of life*, the boys roamed the streets doing jobs for American and Australian soldiers, while at night they had a place to which to retreat.

One boy, aged about fifteen, told me that two years ago his village was bombed. As he was running from the flames, he realised he'd never again see his parents alive. I instantly recalled my mother's recurring nightmare.

There is a Yiddish term, *luftmensch*, meaning literally 'man of air', that I allude to in *Café Scheherazade*. It encapsulates the predicament of those who have been running so long from place to place that they no longer feel the ground beneath their feet. I grew up with such people.

Café Scheherazade was published at about the same time as Aboriginal writer, Kim Scott's novel, *Benang*. The principle character, Harley, begins to literally float up. He becomes a flying narrator. His feet no longer touch the ground. His predicament mirrors that of the refugee, the *luftmensch*. Harley, the indigenous Australian, becomes unearthed because the ground that had long sustained his ancestors had been cut from beneath his feet.

This is the storyteller's paradox!

We recount our own stories or listen to other people's tales, and as writers, we shape them into fiction or non-fiction, novel or memoir.

Whatever the form, our obligation is to honour the

story, its unique characters and places. Yet in remaining true to the craft, the specific tale will resonate with many readers.

The personal is the universal.

And in the specific tale, we discover our common humanity.

Such is the power of story.



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