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## Finding a Good Book to Live In: A Reflective Autoethnography on Childhood Sexual Abuse, Literature and the Epiphany

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## Finding a Good Book to Live In: A Reflective Autoethnography on Childhood Sexual Abuse, Literature and the Epiphany

### Abstract

The topic of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) remains a prevalent issue globally and despite the best efforts of welfare organisations, it would seem that as a society we are no closer to a resolution. CSA is a topic that is discussed in vague terms, but the real impact of CSA on the child is rarely divulged, except behind closed doors. This autoethnographic study traces the life and experiences of CSA of the author and how she used literature and writing as a coping mechanism. Using this powerful methodological tool, the author has been able to expose the implications of the sexual abuse and the use of writing as a place to hide and feel safe. The value of autoethnography is illuminated by demonstrating that poignant and potent data can be collected and then shared in a way that has more impact than other research methods. Second, the value of the researcher as the researched can be viewed as an authentic way of analysing difficult and taboo societal issues such as CSA, where hopefully the results can lead to more insightful and honest discussions about how to confront this problem.

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Evocative Autoethnography, Reflexivity, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Coping Mechanism, Literature, Poetry, Epiphany

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## **Finding a Good Book to Live In: A Reflective Autoethnography on Childhood Sexual Abuse, Literature and the Epiphany**

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*The topic of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) remains a prevalent issue globally and despite the best efforts of welfare organisations, it would seem that as a society we are no closer to a resolution. CSA is a topic that is discussed in vague terms, but the real impact of CSA on the child is rarely divulged, except behind closed doors. This autoethnographic study traces the life and experiences of CSA of the author and how she used literature and writing as a coping mechanism. Using this powerful methodological tool, the author has been able to expose the implications of the sexual abuse and the use of writing as a place to hide and feel safe. The value of autoethnography is illuminated by demonstrating that poignant and potent data can be collected and then shared in a way that has more impact than other research methods. Second, the value of the researcher as the researched can be viewed as an authentic way of analysing difficult and taboo societal issues such as CSA, where hopefully the results can lead to more insightful and honest discussions about how to confront this problem. Keywords: Autoethnography, Evocative Autoethnography, Reflexivity, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Coping Mechanism, Literature, Poetry, Epiphany*

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### **The Researcher**

The author is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education and a Sessional Teacher in Inclusive Education at Monash University. Karen completed an undergraduate Diploma in Primary Teaching in 1989 and spent a number of years teaching in mainstream classrooms across Victoria. She later completed a Graduate Diploma of Education (Professional Studies) and then a Masters of Education (Special and Inclusive Education). Due to a number of experiences teaching in Special Schools Karen realised that she wanted to work with students who have diverse needs. Karen began writing Professional Development (PD) about Autism for teachers and has provided PD Face-to-Face (F2F) and online in Australia and the USA. She has developed her own consultancy, where she works one-on-one with families and students. She is currently employed as a Sessional Teacher at Monash University, which has added another layer to her work as an inclusive educator. When Karen uses 'I' she is writing about herself. Please also note, that as Karen writes about her childhood in Australia, she uses UK spelling.

I wish I could find a good book to live in, wish I could find a good book. If I could find a real, good book, I'd never have to come out and look at...what they've done to my song.

—Melanie Safka, Look what they've done to my song, ma?

## Autoethnography

Let's be real for one moment. Writing about experiences of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is not easy, not comfortable and not generally a topic that one wants to read about. We can beat about the bush and pretend, but CSA is still as rampant as it is has ever been. According to Gray and Rarick (2018) CSA is a "worldwide phenomenon that crosses all cultural and socioeconomic status boundaries and continues to impact children on a daily basis" (p. 571). If someone hit you in the face, you would have no hesitation in reporting the offence, or instructing your child to report it however, most still feel uncomfortable reporting CSA and for good reason.

Children are often not believed and the non-offending parent struggles with the reality this could happen in their family (Katz & Barnetz, 2014; McAlinden, 2006, 2012). So children often hear responses such as: "Ohh, maybe you misunderstood". Or, "are you sure?" Or "it couldn't have been Uncle Dan? He loves children." Most children who are victims of CSA are sworn to silence by the perpetrator and the non-offending parent has difficulty in accepting that someone they know and love could be responsible (Greydanus & Merrick, 2017; McAlinden, 2006, 2012).

Society dictates that CSA is considered craven behaviour, yet I remain cynical about the way we perceive this issue and the subsequent treatment of victims. Shifting cultural attitudes and subconsciously held beliefs will do a lot to dispel the misinformation around CSA. As a community, we need to be more open to discussion on this topic and "demythologize sexual offending and work together with all groups in the community to achieve a more effective, safer way of protecting children and of reducing the offender's opportunity to abuse" (McAlinden, 2006, p. 354). Children who are abused find all sorts of ways to survive the perpetual onslaught upon their bodies. Some escape into behaviours, some into substances and others into fantasy. I chose fantasy, or more to the point, I found a way to escape into more palatable realities (Fargo, 2009; Greydanus & Merrick, 2017; Gray & Rarick, 2018; McAlinden, 2012). I found alternative realities in books, literature and poetry and I also discovered that using writing was a way that I could escape, but also write myself into my own made up narrative (Eaton & Paterson-Young, 2018). I was able to use writing and literary techniques as a way to shroud and mask my experience/s in poetry, metaphor and similes. I resonated with the lyrics of Melanie Safka's *Look what they've done to my song, Ma* and would sing the words with gusto because the lyrics were about my life (Barley & Southcott, 2019) as I literally searched for the perfect book to live in.

Writing narratives using an autoethnographic style can be emotive and evocative. These stories deal with "real people leading actual lives, deal with social, ethical, and moral issues, and work on behalf of social justice" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 10). Given that I have always been drawn to stories and storytelling, it has been no surprise that I have gravitated to the methodology of autoethnographic writing. I find the approach courageous and honest, and it has allowed me to "write stories with raw and naked emotion that investigate life's messiness, including twists of fate and chance" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 10). As I was constructing this study, I didn't want the 'telling' to be pale and insipid, but a bold, personal tale that punched you in the guts (Barley, in press). It could be argued that this approach is 'too much' or too aggressive, but I argue that it is the only approach that may compel society to be less apathetic. I get it. It's confrontational and most don't want to think about the sexual abuse of children, but the not wanting to know perpetuates the problem. So if this autoethnography achieves anything, I hope it will have you asking questions about the children you teach or are responsible for. Am I vigilante enough? Do I take enough notice of the signs? Am I brave enough to make a report when I see a problem?

I also hope that this study will provide a path for those still wrestling with their own abuse so that these “accounts not only serve as sources of social scientific knowledge but also as aids to understanding how others make sense of their own lives” (Philaretou & Allen, 2006, p. 65). I am not suggesting that my work is a beacon for the suffering; instead, I hope it is a catalyst for discovery. Finding a really good book to live in is all very well, but coming out from under the covers leads to freedom from the tyranny of the past. I don’t want to be victim, or survivor (Barley, in press), I want to be transformative and evocative and kick the shit out of the secrecy that makes us recoil into the shell of a victim or survivor. In this way, writing about sensitive topics can be gritty and even daring (Eaton & Paterson-Young, 2018; Philaretou & Allen, 2006; Rambo-Ronai, 1995). Being transformative is being renewed, revived, and regenerated in a way that is not only more honest and real, but also translucent. Writing self reflectively has the ability to be therapeutic, as the narrative stories “enable [us] to retell, relive, and reconstruct [our] subjugated stories, thereby empowering [the writer] for positive change” (Philaretou & Allen, 2006, pp. 65-66).

*A close friend’s father killed himself. I spoke to my friend before the funeral and something she said caused a lightbulb to go on inside my mind. Sounds cliché... all the same, I was stunned by the revelation. My friend lived in another State but I felt a desperate need to attend the funeral and speak to her. I organised the flight, told my husband (at the time), I was going, leaving him at home with my four children. At the same time, I was reconciling my childhood abuse and struggling with my mental health...erratic, darkness, suicidal ideation. As you can imagine, my marriage was in tatters. I arrived at my friend’s house and she was inconsolable. Her entire family was. We hugged and then she asked if we could go to another room to talk. The butterflies raged in the pit of my stomach. I already knew what she was going to tell me. I had wanted this exposé; in some way it would validate my own, but now I was here, it would have been easier to run.*

*She said, “Dad killed himself because” I stopped her and continued the sentence... “He sexually molested you”.*

*She looked at me aghast, “How did you know?”*

*I replied, “I think I’ve always known and because it happened to me... my stepfather had sexually abused me for almost all of my childhood and into my teens.” She didn’t look shocked when I told her, instead displayed a glimpse of resignation.*

*We talked all night. All the pieces fell into place. The weird way her father would kiss her, his possessiveness, her mood when he showed attention to me; like tiny jigsaw shapes, they all merged into one another to form one truth. In that epiphanous instant everything changed for me. It felt like I was sitting on the outside looking in (another cliché) but I knew in order to survive I had to leave my marriage. I had married another version of my stepfather and I had been trying to be the person he wanted me to be and this woman who looked at me in the mirror wasn’t remotely me. I cannot blame my ex-husband, as it wasn’t really his fault. It wasn’t even mine. What I also knew with certainty was that the sexual abuse... I imagined... that caused frequent nightmares... that I was wrestling with... that I could barely speak into existence... that I didn’t want to admit to... WAS TRUE.*

*It is true and that makes me true... now you know me, truly know me like you never knew me before.*

Writing a layered account that reflexively examines my experiences enables me (as the author) to collect and analyse the data at the same time. This also provides an opportunity to explore the relevant literature on the topic (Adams, Ellis & Bochner, 2011; Etherington, 2004). When writing the above vignette, I had to consider many factors, including plausibility, context and the jostling for the truth in the scenario. This process of reflexive writing requires self-awareness as a “dynamic process of interaction within and between our selves and our participants, and the data that inform decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages of research” (Etherington, 2004, p. 36). Whilst I shared my own truth, I deliberately left open ended questions, with no specific answers, in the hope that such questions will encourage self-examination by the reader.

### **Autoethnography and Stories of Sexual Abuse**

There are a number of autoethnographic studies that describe the impact of sexual abuse on the lives of the researchers and the ramifications for the society they lived in. The impact upon an individual’s life, both personally and professionally, is profound and life changing (McAlinden, 2006, 2012). Those who do well despite their experiences, do so because of the need to maintain an “integrity of the self” (Di Palma, 1994, p. 87) where they were able to use fantasy and projection to put themselves mentally in a safer place. This could be achieved by any means, but art, drama and especially writing are recognised as having therapeutic benefits for survivors (Speedy, 2004; Williamson & Wright, 2018).

The use of the methodology of autoethnography is pertinent as the author (who assumes the role of the researcher in the research) can explore areas that can be sensitive and difficult to tackle. As the researched, they can provide invaluable insight that may not be “accessible from mainstream research methods whereby subjects may be unwilling or afraid to disclose sensitive personal information” (Philaretou & Allen, 2006, p. 2). The data collected stems from the life of a “flesh and blood person who is alive, active, and feeling” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 60). These revelations from each author’s lives enable us, as the readers, to feel their vulnerability; weep with them during their most painful life moments; and share their insights and personal reckonings that percolates from their experiences (Berry & Patti, 2015). As such, the following stories are unique but similarly powerful exemplars.

Carol Rambo-Ronai (1995) boldly describes the ongoing sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father. I found her autoethnography incredibly raw and in some ways jarring as she describes in vivid detail the memories and feelings she has during her most vulnerable moments. Her work is extremely evocative and potent, but reading her study forced me to revisit the tame version of my own story. If I was going to be truly honest, I had to be as vulnerable as Carol Rambo-Ronai. Writing about such hideous things in one’s life shouldn’t be something to feel ashamed about and the fact that I still feel some shame tells me there is more work to be done. Rambo-Ronai (1995) examines this phenomenon in her history, as she continued to feel tainted by the ongoing rapes she experienced by her father. She sought to write about her experience and integrate her story into her research and was questioned by her peers. Would revealing so much about her life reflect on her professional career? Her courage in this early autoethnography should be viewed with the respect it deserves. Yet, the question remains... why do we still feel ashamed?

Kwon (2016) grew up in a Chinese culture and writes as a way of “witnessing” her experience of sexual assault during her childhood. She also writes the stories of her grandmother and “comfort woman” (p. 9), Kang, during the Sino-Japanese war where they both were violated and continually raped by soldiers. Using performative autoethnography enabled her to find the strength to write her own story of sexual abuse. She states “despite this internal crisis, my artistic and performative examination of this trauma enabled my

transformation from a victim of sexual assault into a subject of sexual trauma” (Kwon, 2016, p. 8). Kwon equates the writing of her stories was a way of integrating the abuse into her identity and how this became a positive in her life.

Qambela’s painfully written autoethnography examines the seldom discussed issue of male rape of boys and men “who do not fit the hegemonic moulds of idealised masculinity, boyhood and manhood” (Qambela, 2016, p. 179) in post-apartheid South Africa. Qambela, like Rambo-Ronai, questioned how much he should share and asks if he had divulged too much. They both came to the conclusion that the benefit was palpable. Qambela believes the writing of his experience was more cathartic than he expected it to be but was valuable to the overall “[contribution] to knowledge on [the] understanding of masculinities and sexual violence against men” (Qambela, 2016, p. 197). The openness and bravery of this work propelled me to dig deeper into my own history and allowed for a more honest account.

Chubin (2014) recounts what she calls ‘sexual harassment’ experienced by women on a daily basis on the streets of Iran. After reading her autoethnography, I was quick to realise that what she termed ‘harassment’ was actually sexual abuse and violence against women. She identifies the paradox of Iranian females who were expected to be “an honorable woman [who] is so solemn that she discourages male strangers... [and] protective of her modesty by wearing clothing with styles and colors that do not stimulate the eye” (Chubin, 2014, p. 181); yet at the same time if she was a victim of any kind of assault, she should feel shame and responsibility (Chubin, 2014). She states that “it is by examining Iranian women’s personal troubles and through disclosing these experiences as lived that I explore social and political processes that create and perpetuate the experiences of street sexual harassment” (Chubin, 2014, p. 178). What Chubin makes clear is that secrecy and shame are prevalent everywhere and each culture experiences its own way of dealing with the problem, but ostensibly, all cultures have a problem of sexual abuse that permeates and is minimised in every society.

Spry (2001) utilises performative autoethnography where she writes and articulates her own poetry as a way to perform her experiences of sexual abuse. She suggests that the autoethnographical process has “emancipatory potential” as an engaging “emotional texturing of... a live participative embodied researcher” (p. 709). Furthermore, “the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns” (p. 711). Under examination, Spry attempts to make critical, political and personal sense of the sexual assault that she experienced. Employing the tool of writing, she was able to “rewrite that experience as a woman with strength and agency rather than accepting the victimage discourse of sexual assault” (p. 712). I felt a strong connection to this author, as my intention is also to make this my primary goal in developing this and other autoethnographies as a way of transformation and epiphanous change. I am using my ability to write as a way of performing my stories. Especially in the autoethnography, ‘Life is a box of Derwents’ (Barley, 2020), this story, my story unfolded like a stream of consciousness as the words spilled upon the page. I deliberately didn’t edit the poetic in the writing, instead allowed the metaphors, similes and alliteration to remain as an integral element of the story writing. The words became the performance, with a deliberate intent to provoke emotion in the witness/es; the story was intended to be imagined, felt and experienced (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

The common thread that weaves throughout all of these studies is: the profundity of emotion attached to the experiences; the questioning and reluctance associated with victimhood and shame; the aching need to somehow “perform” the work; whether that be through art, writing, or poetry; the efficacious and evocative rendering of the story; and the catharsis that coincides with the resolution of the study. Kwon (2016) describes this as reviewing and revising his “eyewitness testimony of shattered images of repeated trauma. [He decries that he] was not secondarily victimized or traumatized by it, but instead convinced to see, understand, and feel my trauma that cannot be seen with my own eyes” (p. 16).



### Why Is the Epiphany so Important in this Context?

Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
 Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
 All your life  
 You were only waiting for this moment to arise  
 Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
 Take these sunken eyes and learn to see  
 All your life  
 You were only waiting for this moment to be free  
 —The Beatles, Blackbird

The epiphany is an inherent byproduct of autoethnographic writing. This genre of writing can be multilayered connecting, consciousness, the personal and cultural experiences of the author (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The autoethnographer pans inward and outward, as they examine their lived experience through a narrow lens, but in context of the wider cultural experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). These accounts are usually “written [using] first-person voice... [and] are featured in relational, family, institutional, and community stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Writing about poignant and intimate experiences “situate people in predicaments in which they must deal with and/or solve problems in order to find and/or create some emotional truth out of experiences they’ve lived through” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 85). The epiphany emerges from the struggle and is like “turning on a new light in a new room” (Douglas & Carless, 2013, p. 92). The autoethnography as a research tool in this context has the potential to be inspirational and transformative.

I have written in a deliberate attempt to provoke the audience's imagination to live the experience with me and in doing so the reader will “not have to struggle endlessly to understand and relate” to my story. As the writer, my “challenge is to artfully arrange” the portrayal, narrative and memory of my life where the audience feels like they have been co-opted in the same book (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 79). The following narrative elucidates this by taking you to the environment of my childhood:

*Across the road from my house there was a block of flats. The flats were housing commissioned and oozed impoverishment and decay. I often played in the playground of the flats and part of the play was running up and down four flights of stairs. One day, when I was about ten, I ran to the very top story. At the top was a laundry, clothes lines and hard, white concrete that us kids would run around and play hide and seek. The night before, I had experienced another visit from my stepfather. I can't recall the inbetweens, but the before and after was filled with dread and then pain respectively. As well as the nightly visits of terror, was the daily turmoil and abuse. I wish I could say that there was love from my Mother, there was not. She was so busy having babies, and trying to hold onto a man who was a drunken abuser, that she had forgotten about me.*

*I arrived at the top of the stairs, then walked to the protective wall. Someone had left a table that they must have used for a party, so I climbed up onto it and peered over the edge. I teetered for a long time and wondered about jumping off the ledge. Maybe I would fly... maybe not. Would it hurt? Would I feel anything going down? Would that unknown be preferable to the known that I was enduring? Then, the strangest thing happened... I thought I heard a voice*



*in the wind, "It's not time to fly yet." There was a time when I would have told you that I believed the voice was that of an angel and they carried me off the table... now I don't know. Whatever the explanation, the epiphany was clear... I had to hang in there. Which is of course, what I did. The next day (perhaps by coincidence, perhaps by design) there were evangelical singers in the park. I felt drawn to their songs and their energy. I still remember the book they gave me, it was a wordless book with five colours, black, red, white, gold, green representing aspects of Jesus. When they invited me to Sunday school, I was rapt. I gladly went, as this meant I could escape my family for half of each Sunday. Also, I got to see other families who were loving and met people who were kind. I can't say I have retained any kind of Christian faith, but I am eternally grateful for the love and generosity the congregation demonstrated to a little girl who was profoundly lost.*

This story is illustrative of a ten year old's crossroad. I was becoming more and more alert to the fact that my family life was different to others. There was also an awareness that I had to survive my childhood and this would demonstrate more courage than jumping off a building. Despite the *noetic* quality of this epiphany, I can't say it was any kind of belief or experience with some kind of deity that propelled me to alter my trajectory. The kindness of strangers gave me hope there was more to humanity than I experienced in my home; so in parallel, reading and writing took on more meaning. I began noticing everything around me as signs and symbols, which meant the books I read and music I listened to were like roadmaps. I could no longer rely upon my family as a moral compass; I could only be guided by myself and the stories I lived in.

### **My Relationship to the Epiphany**

'My dear young fellow,' the Old-Green-Grasshopper said gently, 'there are a whole lot of things in this world of ours you haven't started wondering about yet.'

—Roald Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*

As a child, I only knew the emotions of fear or freedom. Fear when my stepfather came home. And freedom, when he was not. We had a strangely shaped house, with a huge bluestone, cobbled backyard. The yard used to be a stable. At the side of the house, was a driveway and every day when my stepfather arrived home, he would toot the horn of the car. The ceremonial announcement that the ruler was here! We had to open the gate for him, so he could drive through. As soon as I heard that loud horn, the dread punched me in the stomach. That feeling would gouge and gnaw until he was gone again. It was only then that I could take a breath.

Growing up in an environment of domestic abuse, books and literature became a pathway to escape and fantasy. Reading Enid Blyton, Louisa May Alcott, Sarah Chauncey Woolsey and other acceptable girl's fiction was a first step along this route. There was a detour to Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl and then the ultimate literary adventure, Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1997). The creative and symbolic style, interwoven with allegory and metaphors piqued my imagination and stirred the inner burgeoning author. Reading and writing became a quintessential part of me. Pen and paper became the tool of my first language, being the solitary companion and form of expression for an otherwise silent girl.

Reading *The Hobbit* for the first time, I experienced my earliest literary epiphany. The illumination being that writing could be more than just prose and could entail all sorts of hidden meanings and intentions. I am not sure I could have survived without being able to write and

equally; I am not sure I could have survived without the epiphany. The epiphany became the way I came to understand the world and to know myself within that world. It was the way I could accept the events that occurred in my life and to use those events to grow myself. Petridou (2016) suggests that the epiphany doesn't cause the connection...the connection causes the epiphany, insofar that those epiphanic moments are waiting to be allowed to pop and provide access. It was a way in which I could develop my own understandings and feelings about my childhood experiences, where the "shift in the quality of experience that result[ed] in a heightened sense of the presence of something precious" (Mason, 2007, p. 353).

Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling anyway.

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

To escape the toxicity of my family situation, writing also became a "coping mechanism" that kept me from being "overwhelmed with complicated, scary, threatening, or traumatic memories or thoughts" (Eaton & Paterson-Young, 2018, p. 60). Writing was how I survived the abuse but was also how I expressed what was happening to me. I discovered that excelling in everything I did (especially academically) was an act of rebellion (Eaton & Paterson-Young, 2018). I would often hear my stepfather tell my Mother that "I was never going to amount to anything" so I intended to succeed brilliantly just to spite him. My private jottings were also a silent demonstration against his oppression AND what was even better, was the feeling that I could outsmart him. He never realised that what I was writing about was his abuse of me. Once he insisted on knowing what I was doing, so I showed him a poem I was writing. The anxiety rose in the pit of my stomach, as I thought, "What if gets it?" He read the words with a confused look on his face and exclaimed, "Doesn't make any bloody sense"... I took the page from him and silently smiled and declared, "It does to me!"

### Poetry, Epiphany and Me

Sometimes I feel like I don't even know the me that is me,  
The only me I know, is a me I don't really know at all  
—Karen Barley, *The me that is me*

My family were not literary minded. I never observed my step dad reading a book (in fact he would often decry, "I hate reading") and my Mum read occasionally, later in life when she was no longer busy with little children. My Nana (on my Mother's side) was illiterate and my Pop read medical or art books as he was fascinated with both genres. My step grandmother read Mills and Boon...kind of says it all really. I loved books, but there were none in my house. I recall going to play at a friend's house and their walls were lined with bookcases filled to the brim with tomes on every topic...ohh how I loved their house. I fawned over homes I viewed in the movies that had a library inside the house...with a ladder that would slide across the room...I would dream of a room like that. Reading was my first and most enduring love. Everywhere I went, I would have a book in my hand. I knew the characters intimately and I found fantasy and meaning in all words. If I wasn't reading stories, I was singing songs. I would sit by my Mum's big, freestanding record player and play her old 45 vinyls. I found meaning in the songs and before I knew it, I would be daydreaming about my imagined, wonderful life.

Discovering poetry was an organic extension of my love of literature, but this didn't occur until I was about sixteen in High School during English classes. Prior to that, I had

developed a love of the poetry in music. As much as I enjoyed the music, it was the words that were most poignant and meaningful to me. I eventually started writing poetry because of my love of the lyrics of Dylan, McCartney and Lennon, Davies and Hodgson, Joni Mitchell and of course Melanie Safka. There was one album that helped me survive my teens, Supertramp's "Crisis What Crisis" (1975). Every song meant something, from Easy Does It, to Sister Moonshine, Aint Nobody but Me, and the Two of Us. For the girl struggling to survive in a family pervaded by violence and "drunkenness," Davies and Hodgson (1975) surely wrote this album for me.

And if my thoughts had wings  
 I'd be the bird that sings  
 I'd fly where love isn't shy  
 And everyone is willing to try  
 ... And if you know who you are  
 You are your own superstar  
 And only you can shape the movie that you make  
 —Supertramp, Easy Does It

A natural segue was that of lyrics to poetry, as I recognised that words had a powerful effect on me. This discovery, as a teenager was the ultimate epiphany moment. Moved and inspired by the texture and layers of the verse of Yeats, Plath, Blake, Hopkins and Eliot (to name a few), I discovered, with every line, an altered experience of personal knowledge, awareness and epiphany. I could read and write words that appeared in code, interwoven with secret fantasies, dreams and musings. This might not seem much of an epiphany, but for a girl growing up with an abusive and oppressive step parent, the ability to delve inside the secret world of words, without worrying about being exposed, provided an emotional outlet and freedom from the tyranny of domesticity. This unearthing provided light amidst the sordidness of my troubled home life and, in many ways, shaped my formative identity; including values, morals and sense of self. As the child who wanted to fly away from the abuse she suffered, I integrated poetry into my box of coping tools. I wrote poems of escape and transformation and I often wrote, yearning for a form of love even though it was some nebulous intangible notion I had not experienced. Eaton and Paterson-Young (2018, p. 68) claim that "for the child writing poems, the feelings of romance and love effectively disguised the level of violence and abuse she experienced every day."

I became enthralled by the words of the classic poets, as they spoke to me in ways no one else had. Reading William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* inspired me to look past the darkness of my childhood and propelled me into the realm of verse and imagination.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
 And Eternity in an hour  
 —William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

The simplicity of Blake thrilled me, for even the smallest of words could hold a memory, a thought, an experience. Words were like a cave that you could crawl into and hibernate, leaving the world outside to its own devices. I began to use poetry not only as a way to escape; but to forge my own identity, my own values, my own knowledge of the world, via the process of reading, thinking and writing (Mason, 2007). Reading the text of others, can "become meaningful vehicles for creating a shift of perspective from the ordinary to the

extraordinary” by way of an epiphany (Mason, 2007, p. 360). Poetry illuminates text phenomenologically where it allows the reader to see what was previously hidden (van Manen, 1990). It is as if, reading poetry became a perpetual act of an “aha” moment; a cadence of epiphanies of wonder, awareness and insight. Poetry has a way of awakening our perceptions, which shakes and expands our world by using metaphor and image to illuminate lived experience (Kirmayer, 2000).

### Poems of Importance

When I completed my Higher School Certificate, the natural path for me was to choose English Literature as one of my subjects. English, being a separate and compulsory subject, meant I could devote my time to my favourite pastime in two subjects. My English Literature teacher had a passion for the topic and with a rich, baritone voice. He could read poetry in a way where the words would jump off the page and bounce straight into the imagination. I was captivated. I made the connection between the lyrics I loved and poetry and found epiphanies throughout. I would continue to read and write poetry throughout my late teens and when I did my teaching degree.

The first poem I read of notable significance was nineteenth Century English mystical and lyrical poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins’ *The Windhover*. This poem was a symphony of words and I danced with the meaning and alliterative play. Hopkin’s epiphanic ode “To Christ our Lord” read as magic and wonder. Hopkins was a religious poet, but I was less enraptured by the religion than I was with his literary inspiration. He motivated the emergent poet in me to play with meaning, experiment with metaphors, and percolate and play with words, to hear how they sounded sitting beside one another.

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
 —Gerald Manley Hopkins, *The Windhover*

This poem was like a song and I would read it aloud because I loved the way it sang. The words flowed together and formed a symphony. I also wondered about the Windhover, what sort of bird was this that deserved such accolades. The windhover is a bird that has the rare ability to hover, still in the air, while it scans on the ground for potential prey. The Windhover was the me that wished to rise above the world, peruse the view and scan for danger. The lyrical element of the poem filled me with tangible wonder and joy which instilled a semblance of hope.

When I first read Eliot, I had no idea what he was writing about. Does anybody? My first reaction was that the poem made no sense. Then, I read the words aloud (I like the way words sound, especially in poetry) and delved into the layers of the text, the animation of each line, the punctuation and the pauses. I felt like an explorer and losing myself within the poems of Eliot was an awakening, the poetic epiphany. It wasn’t so much that profound knowledge emanated from the poem, but there was a spark of something visceral and somatic. Every line had movement and physicality; and every word could be what I imagined it to be. This brought another level of sagacity found within the written word; a further exploration, but also a mystery. Ohhhh! What could I do with this newfound wonder? Add more complexity to my own musings and also imbue all of my secrets deeper inside the verses. Writing allowed me to

employ literary techniques such as metaphors and similes that can “bring new things into consciousness leading to initially unperceived knowledge” (Dyson, 2007, p. 46).

His soul stretched tight across the skies  
 That fade behind a city block,  
 Or trampled by insistent feet  
 At four and five and six o'clock;  
 And short square fingers stuffing pipes,  
 And evening newspapers, and eyes  
 Assured of certain certainties,  
 The conscience of a blackened street  
 Impatient to assume the world.

—T.S. Eliot, Preludes

I found a real connection to the griminess of Eliot. It felt like me... and my childhood. It felt like the neighbourhood I grew up in; working class, full of poverty, a pub on each corner and grubby children squealing and playing while the adults ignored them. It was perverse and cynical; hope was elusive in the littered, dirty streets. Reading Eliot was like being in the backyard waiting for my stepfather to come home. Eliot was the dark and depressed in me; the anger and the sadness; the fear and betrayed. Each word held an awakening, and it was hard to take. It was difficult to accept that Eliot encapsulated (I'm sure not intentionally) the me, that was the abused child.

The moment of deepest profundity was ignited when I read Sylvia Plath's *The Arrival of the Bee Box*. Just like the lyricists I loved, it was as if Sylvia Plath wrote these words for me, or to me. This poem, like no other elucidated an intense, personal relationship to every word, theme and evocation. I *was* the beekeeper, and I hung on every word of revelation and discovery.

I wonder how hungry they are.  
 I wonder if they would forget me  
 If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.  
 ... They might ignore me immediately  
 ... I am no source of honey  
 So why should they turn on me?  
 Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.  
 The box is only temporary.

—Sylvia Plath, *The Arrival of the Bee Box*

Reading this work was firstly epiphanous and then transformative. Feeling torn between fear and responsibility, my young life was perpetually plagued with despair. As I wrestled with my conflicting emotions, I struggled with Plath's meaning behind the verses, but at the same time I felt as if I was sitting on the edge of my seat. I read and re-read. Via this poem, I was able to confront my own life experience and the endless competition between the emotions of fear and responsibility. The beekeeper in Plath's poem feels responsible for the welfare of the bees, but she feels terrified of them at the same time. I felt responsible for my family, but I lived in fear of what they had done and could do. Survivors often take on the role of carers where they nurture the people around them (Di Palma, 1994; Rambo-Ronai, 1995) and they also take responsibility for the family's wellbeing (Ahmad & Nasir, 2010). Just like the beekeeper, I believed I had to save my family, but at the same time, I detested them because of the terror they provoked within me.

The power of the writing and the symbolism of Plath's words incited a private exploration and experimentation with language in ways that felt like uncharted territory. This connection in itself, was epiphanous. For a girl who had lived inside books for as long as she could read, the knowledge that I could bury myself deeper inside the words upon a page was a true revelation. I crawled with Hopkins, walked with Eliot, but I ran with Plath. Not only that, words became a more potent tool for my personal revolution: to conceal memories, to speak truth and to silently protest against my oppressors.

*When I was thirteen, I ran away from home. It was the second time I considered suicide. My Mother was not that effective when it came to my stepfather, but by this time she was literally making herself ill. My stepfather would come home drunk, then she would scream and yell, violence would ensue and then my Mother would spend the next week in bed with some imagined illness. My stepfather would then fawn over her and they would go back to the honeymoon phase. My parents would virtually live their entire marriage in and out of the honeymoon stage and us kids would be left on the sidelines, wondering what the fuck just happened. The day I ran away was one such occasion. A few days prior I came home and they were both sitting on the porch steps. We are going to separate, they tell me. You can choose who you stay with. "Ohh fuck!" This is going to seem completely mental, but one of my siblings chose to stay with my stepfather and I knew I would have to stay with him so he wouldn't be alone. The beekeeper... that was me. I laid awake for the next two nights. How could I possibly stay with him? As hopeless as my Mum was, at least she was a buffer. I needn't have to worried, because two days later we were back to the honeymoon phase. "Sighhhhhhhh." That night, forgetting my allegiance to him, my stepfather tried to force crumbed lamb brains down my throat. I ran out the door. I couldn't stand it anymore... death was better than this fucking nightmare. But how... but where... I was lost. My responsibility to myself kicked in. Needless to say, I survived. I was found and I was tortured by being forced to stay close to my stepfather for daring to do something so despicable. I wrote reams of poetry at this point; my characters were animals who found superhero strength; or a human who discovered she could fly; or a child who made friends with a dolphin who showed her she could escape to a paradise under the ocean. All the characters and their worlds were good and safe places to be.*

## Discussion

### Protection and Escape: The Ultimate Oxymoron

The greatest contribution of bees and other pollinators is the pollination of nearly three quarters of the plants that produce 90% of the world's food.

—World Bee Day Organisation

I am allergic to bees, so any sting I get in the future could potentially prove fatal. Yet, because of my fascination with the poem, *The Arrival of the Bee Box*, I have been strangely enchanted by the bee species. Ecologically, bees are vitally important to agriculture. Bees are responsible for the pollination of a third of the world's food production, as well as providing a role in the propagation of high quality foods such as honey and royal jelly (World Bee Day Organisation, 2019). To care for bees requires highly regulated management and cultivation. Looking after bees requires registration (each country and state has its own requirements) and

any future owner has a legal and moral obligation to maintain the bees in a healthy state (Agriculture Victoria, 2018). Beekeepers need to be cautious and use safe procedures when dealing with bees. Protective and light clothing is necessary, with a specially designed beekeepers hat, complete with veil, elasticised cuffs, thick gloves and elastic sided boots (Agriculture Victoria, 2019). This uniform is vital to ensure the safety of the beekeeper when dealing with the bees in their environment. The beekeeper provides the perfect allegory for the plight of the sexually abused child. This child feels responsible for the very thing that could cause them harm and even death. Despite donning appropriate and protective clothing, fear and danger feels imminent. The beekeeper's garb becomes the protection *and* the escape (by way of providing a layer) from a possible bee attack. Any fear one might feel is ignored because of the care that is required to keep the bee population alive and well harvested.

As a child who experienced CSA, I can testify to the tension experienced when you are trapped in an abusive environment. When I was younger, it did not occur to me that I should expose my stepfather. A young child isn't aware that what they are experiencing is abnormal, until they are exposed to the larger world and you realise that this kind of behaviour doesn't happen in other families (Ahmad & Nasir, 2010; Greydanus & Merrick, 2017; Slater, 2013). By this time, the person who is offending has either sworn you to silence, or made you feel responsible for your own abuse (Greydanus & Merrick, 2017). I wasn't groomed by my stepfather because he did not show much love to me at any time. He was oppressive, dogmatic and emotionally abusive. As long as I can remember, I hated him. I feared him. Yet I had no idea I could escape him. Tethered to his abuse of me, was his grooming of my Mother. He groomed her so well that she could not escape him (Barrett, 2010; DiLilo & Damashek, 2003). He controlled her financially, emotionally and sexually. I often witnessed my stepfather groping my Mother, whispering in her ear, putting his hands up her legs and under her skirt. She was completely under his spell and when he did not pay attention to her, she threw a two year old style tantrum. If she couldn't get his attention, she would suddenly get sick and spend weeks in bed. This meant, I was left to raise my siblings. I was responsible for the wellbeing of my family. Under these conditions, how could I tell? Even if I did, I was never sure that my Mother would do anything to help me (Barrett, 2010; DiLilo & Damashek, 2003). It was obvious to me that she cared more about her needs than mine. So, I had no choice but to don the beekeeper's protective garb and buffer myself from the stings.

### **The Value of Literature**

Write till your ink be dry, and with your tears  
Moist it again, and frame some feeling line  
That may discover such integrity.

—William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

The value of literature in my life was vital to my survival as a human. Books were the perfect escape and also the inspiration for further liberation from the despotism of my family. Paul Fry, English Professor at Yale University describes literature as being “a pleasant art of illusion” and poetry as “verbal magic” (Fry, 1980, pp. 2-3) where the utilisation of words on a page can take the reader on a journey of illusion and imagination. The magic and illusory nature of words can also precipitate and invoke transformative breakthroughs that can transcend the moment. James (1985) refers to memorable scripts of literature that are moving and powerful passages transporting us through “irrational doorways” that can be mysterious and thrilling (p. 3014). Literature has the power to be evocative and induce epiphanies that can transform lives and provide insight and illumination (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Stories and poetic expression have the ability to “elevate the sensory and perceptual experience to unprecedented heights”



(Bauer, 2001, p. 4), which can provide a powerful insight into the author/s and by osmosis, the reader's life (Bauer, 2001). The epiphanic element is the vital ingredient to the "escape" component of the written work. The literary techniques and skill of the writer can make "the sense of "escape" possible, but the real escape is perhaps one of slipping the leash of the habitual and becoming new again in our own, and consequently, others' stories" (Williamson & Wright, 2018, p. 117).

Writing can also be psychologically beneficial and provide a pathway to healing and even cure (Bolton, 2004; Speedy, 2013; Williamson & Wright, 2018). Writing can be a coping mechanism that helps children to survive an environment of systematic abuse in their home (Eaton & Paterson-Young, 2018). Abused children may be hiding behind layers of constructed self-protection and their outward behavior could be an indicator of their inward angst and struggle against their environment. Anyone working with children should not underestimate the importance of literature in a child's life as well as creating a space for escape and engaging the imagination. This could be a topic for future studies.

### **Limitation and Conclusion**

The wrestle I have with over exposing my experiences of sexual abuse is a tenuous but reflexive one (Etherington, 2004). This juxtaposition is exemplified using the analogy of the bee box and the beekeeper and the correlation of fear and responsibility experienced as a child and my sense of fear and responsibility in this research process. Both of these emotions run at each end of the continuum respectively. I felt fearful about exposing myself and the contemptible, grimy details of sexual abuse. I felt scared that if I told too much, the reader would question if I had taken it too far. I felt fear that I was also opening the Pandora's Box of secrets and that I would be forced to confront those head on. On the other end of the continuum, I was fearful that a tame tale would not be potent or compelling; would not be powerful and would NOT affect the reader in a way that is epic and epiphanic. Without gruesome and honest recall, how can I evoke emotion, empathy, understanding, empowerment? Second is, the problem of responsibility. On one hand, I have a responsibility to myself and those who know me. Does keeping my secret keep me safe? Keeping the lid on means not exposing myself to scrutiny, judgement or questioning? I could become the bee trapped inside the bee box. On the other hand, do I have a responsibility to keep you, the reader safe? Is it ok to expose you to the shock and possible trigger that could stem from my stories? OR, is my responsibility to myself to be bold, courageous, open and say "fuck off" to anyone who dares to question my veracity? Keeping the secret perpetuates the crux of the problem... sexual abuse remains a hidden topic, because we keep the secrets, because we remain silent, because we don't report, because we are vilified when we do. That responsibility extends to the reader, because painting a prettier picture is deluding and delusional.

As I reflexively examined all the angles, the answer was crystalised. I owe it to myself and to you to be naked with my brutal transparency. I can no longer care about what you think of me and restrain myself as a result. I also owe it to society to do the same. The expression of shame, pain and responsibility for being abused, is not mine. It belongs to those who perpetrated those devious acts. There was nothing I did to call that upon myself. It was not possible to expose what was happening to me any earlier and reporting is not as easy as one might think. Nevertheless, it doesn't matter and doesn't change the facts, or the experience, or the aftermath. AND it should not be MY responsibility. It is time we changed this rhetoric and resist putting the onus upon the victim. Considering the epiphany inside an autoethnography... without gutsy, true and impactful data, the epiphany is unlikely to be piqued and combustible. The narrative should be eloquent enough to make the reader feel like they were living the story with the author.

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### Author Note

The author is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education and a Sessional Teacher in Inclusive Education at Monash University. Karen completed an undergraduate Diploma in Primary Teaching in 1989 and spent a number of years teaching in mainstream classrooms across Victoria. She later completed a Graduate Diploma of Education (Professional Studies) and then a Masters of Education (Special and Inclusive Education). Due to a number of experiences teaching in Special Schools Karen realised that she wanted to work with students who have diverse needs. Karen began writing Professional Development (PD) about Autism for teachers and has provided PD Face-to-Face (F2F) and online in Australia and the USA. She has developed her own consultancy, where she works one-on-one with families and students. She is currently employed as a Sessional Teacher at Monash University, which has added another layer to her work as an inclusive educator. When Karen uses 'I' she is writing about herself. Please also note, that as Karen writes about her childhood in Australia, she uses UK spelling. Correspondence can be addressed directly to: [karen.barley@monash.edu](mailto:karen.barley@monash.edu).

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