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Abstract

Although the stories in Marion Halligan's *Shooting the Fox* can be read independently, they also form an intricate whole where individual stories complement and reflect one another. A Garden of Eden, fruitful and safely enclosed until corruption and loss intervene, forms the book's central motif. Language and communication are also important themes, as is the writer's role in creating fictional worlds, where, serpent-like she introduces discord and betrayal to advance her narrative. Halligan's opening story, gives the collection its name, establishing most of the book's major ideas so that other stories appear to develop out of or relate back to it.

DOROTHY JONES

Trouble in Eden: Marion Halligan's *Shooting the Fox*

Although the stories in Marion Halligan's *Shooting the Fox* can be read independently, they also form an intricate whole where individual stories complement and reflect one another. A Garden of Eden, fruitful and safely enclosed until corruption and loss intervene, forms the book's central motif. Language and communication are also important themes, as is the writer's role in creating fictional worlds, where, serpent-like she introduces discord and betrayal to advance her narrative. Halligan's opening story, gives the collection its name, establishing most of the book's major ideas so that other stories appear to develop out of or relate back to it.

Gloria Jones, narrator of 'Shooting the Fox', is 'a forty-three-year-old virgin' who teaches French at an exclusive girls' school whilst keenly aware of the contrast between her flower-like pupils and her ageing self, 'like a rose hip on a branch, tight and firm and yellowish brown' (2). In class, teacher and pupils rely on the discipline of reciting French verbs to keep 'lascivious scents at bay' (2). Nevertheless, Gloria is wooed and eventually won by a writer, John Malcolm Crape Pembroke, who invites her to his convict-built tower deep in the New South Wales high country, insisting she come and see a fox he has shot on his property that morning, and promising her a fur coat, made from the pelts of foxes he shoots, to match her own 'russet, foxy-coloured' hair (9). Despite her sexual inexperience, Gloria is shrewdly aware of the possibilities and paradoxes of her situation. Malcolm proposes to write for her the same cultivated life, full of sensuous and intellectual pleasures, he enjoys, 'though it didn't occur to me that it wasn't my life' (6). Despite reservations, however, she marries, only to be caught within her husband's story. On their wedding night, Malcolm explains that his wealth comes from producing very expensive high class pornography, illustrated with elegant drawings, whilst insisting that, unlike photographs, these harm no one, although Gloria has her doubts:

I knew what he was talking about. The antique style of pornography. For rich men, whose wealth and honourable standing in the community was presumed to protect them from corruption. Not the vulgar cheap effects of television and movies. (13)

Halligan blends fairy-tale and gothic romance to create an edge of menace, with echoes of Edgar Allen Poe, *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca*, and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, but Gloria's apparently ideal situation is a form of stasis where threatened dangers never eventuate:

Malcolm is away, but he forbids me nothing. There are no locked rooms whose key I am not allowed to employ. No boxes I must not open. I am enjoined to look at everything. No fruits I must not eat. (18)

Although she is identified with the foxes Malcolm shoots, he has no need to harm her physically for she is firmly confined within the world he has constructed. Denied agency, she yearns for prohibitions so she may develop her own narrative: 'I am waiting for him to tell me what I must not do' (18).

The fruit must be picked. The room must be unlocked, and the lady turns the key, staining it with telltale blood. The pomegranate seeds must be nibbled, and Persephone complies. The box must be opened and Pandora obliges. (17)

Halligan's exploration of male/female power relationships underlies many of the stories, bearing out Gloria's view that it is women characters who generally promote the narrative through their response to male directives.

Despite a long-standing identification of women with cunning vixens, Halligan's foxes are images of female vulnerability. Traditionally, however, in art and literature, the animal appears as a dangerous male predator. In D.H. Lawrence's, 'The Fox', which Gloria's narrative also evokes, two young women, known by their surnames, Banford and March, are hampered in their ineffectual attempts to run a poultry farm by a fox constantly raiding their henhouse. March, haunted by the creature's presence, feels him 'invisibly master her spirit', (Lawrence 7) and when a young soldier, Henry Grenfel, offers to shoot it, he himself replaces the animal in her imagination since both man and beast are embodiments of wild nature. Henry, who determines to master and marry March, causes Banford's death through a kind of symbolic murder, yet while March accepts his proposal, he remains uncertain she will yield the total submission he requires:

He wanted to make her submit, yield, blindly pass away out of all her strenuous consciousness, and make her just his woman. Just his woman. (68)

Another Halligan story 'The White Peacock', set on the Monaro plateau, gestures towards Lawrence's novel of that name whilst questioning the extent and nature of female as opposed to male power. Jess, the local schoolteacher, with a failed marriage behind her, still hopes to meet a compatible man, but finds her one persistent suitor, Vaughan, physically unattractive. Nevertheless, she agrees to accompany him to visit a garden with peacocks, driving through countryside which seems to be '[w]aiting for a fairytale to happen. Grimm, or someone. A wicked stepmother' (36). Nothing so sinister occurs, and they enter Eden, a small fishing village on the New South Wales south coast where they observe three male peacocks court a small brown peahen in the garden.

In Lawrence's novel, a peacock, 'its tail glimmering like a stream of coloured stars' (Lawrence 147), defecates on a stone angel in the local graveyard, disgusting the misogynist gamekeeper, Annable, and reminding him of the aristocratic wife who previously rejected him (148). Later he admits she may not have been entirely

at fault, prompting a suggestion that she was, perhaps, a white peacock. Ironically, it is the male bird Lawrence identifies with female vanity and pride. In Halligan's story, two birds courting the peahen have the customary blue colouring, but the third, which Jess considers particularly beautiful, is white. Vaughan, however, explains the peahen will mate only with a blue-feathered bird. The white one is an albino, unable to breed because never chosen, so for Vaughan the female bird becomes an image of power: 'All that display ... for one little dull brown bird. And she chooses. They're gorgeous but she chooses' (41). This image of a small brown bird recurs in other stories, usually associated with a betrayed or submissive wife. Women may have power to choose whom they will marry, only to be rendered insignificant in their husband's shadow.

Not all personal Edens are as exotic as Gloria's tower. Other stories imply that happy family life within a secure domestic enclosure represents many people's desired existence, although that too proves precarious. The narrative of a husband who enjoys the embrace of a mistress in addition to home comforts his wife provides recurs with variations throughout *Shooting the Fox*. In 'Valiant' an errant husband finds it increasingly arduous to juggle domestic responsibilities with the demands of his young mistress and former student, Vikki, as he drives between two households in his old Valiant. He himself, however, proves no Prince Valiant, refusing, despite many promises, to leave his wife even when Vikki throws herself theatrically before his car to prevent him driving home. While she lies there, her lover jots down a sentence for an academic text he is composing on suburban alienation: 'If Vikki noticed what I was doing she would go mad'. Writing necessarily involves betrayal, since that is what creates the story.

The married man and the young woman. She believes he will leave his wife for her. So does he. But he doesn't. He is that kind of bastard... There's another narrative, in which the man does leave his wife, and in that he's another kind of bastard. Neither is an attractive tale, but there would be no narrative if they were. (29)

'We Were Sitting in the Garden' features that other kind of bastard. In a suburban garden where newly-spread blood and bone gives off the 'odour of corruption', two long-married, middle-aged wives, Toni and Moira, discuss Moira's predicament. Her husband has demanded a divorce, a consequence of chasing porn sites on the laptop purchased when he retired: 'He went from porn to dating sites and found this tart and that's it' (175). Her emotional security is shattered, and her material circumstances greatly diminished since the house must be sold to pay her husband his share of the proceeds:

...where am I going to live? I'll never get anything round here for half what we get for the house, not in this market. All my life is here, my neighbours, friends. And the garden, I've worked so hard on that garden, I'm just getting it right, I love it, I can't bear to part with it. (176)

The story ends with Toni reflecting, 'it is true, we are never safe' (180), as she goes indoors to find her own husband just closing up his laptop.

Other stories explore a writer's responsibility to her characters and her readers. 'Bingle' opens with a young woman, Tania, driving to work, while deploring her monotonous life and yearning for excitement, when another car rams her from behind. The male driver proves grossly abusive as Tania slides to the ground at his feet, but she berates the author, protesting against the earlier account of her dreary life and demanding the perpetrator of the accident give her a lift in his car despite the omniscient narrator's warning, 'He's a nasty man, full of road rage' (74). Tania disagrees: 'He looks as though he should be wrapped in white woollen robes on a thoroughbred in the desert. An Arab steed' (74). The author, however, has her standards: 'I'm not writing a fantasy out of a Rudolph Valentino movie' (74). She then disputes the conventions of romantic fiction with Tania who indicates her desired conclusion:

[He] fell in love with me when he saw me lying helpless on the ground — We get married and have four children and live happily ever after. (78)

The narrator dismisses this: 'I don't do closure' (79). She wants the story to convey anxiety, unease and menace, but Tania protests: 'Why can't it be nice? Why can't it be true love and marriage and children and happy ever after?' (81). The author then bundles her off to hospital, where she might just meet a doctor who will fall in love with her — 'But I don't need to write that' (84). Halligan mocks certain types of genre fiction, along with reader expectations, while also highlighting how fantasies of romantic love may entrap women within narratives they find impossible to control.

The writer also appears as a fictional character in 'What About the Spider?' credited with authorship of *Spider Cup*, a novel of Halligan's own about a wife's fantasies of revenge on her unfaithful husband. An audience member approaches the writer at a literary festival querying why she has never written about a disrupted marriage from the spider's viewpoint, the rival who has 'drawn the husband to her and is clutching him tight with these sticky hairy legs' (97). Recognising this as a limitation in her own work the author acknowledges that the 'other woman' generally makes the story happen: 'She's the agent in the narrative of the couple but she has her own tale as well' (97). Ancient-mariner-like, the woman insists on recounting her rather miserable experience as a married man's mistress, while the sympathetic writer keeps developing the story in her mind, probing its narrative possibilities further. When a friend claims that secrets are never safe with writers, she responds, 'They turn them into fiction and that's safe' (101).

The fantasies driving romantic fiction — that ideal happiness results from female submission and lasting union with a dominant man — often prove a poison cup. 'Bingle' and 'What About the Spider' frame the darkest story in the collection 'Together Forever', its title yet another romantic cliché. Ros, the narrator, records three stages in her life: as a young teenager, then twenty years later, and again twenty years after that. As a barely pubescent country girl, she is seduced by the Anglican priest who heads the secondary school hostel where she boards: 'He

said that was what God wanted, it was innocent and pure, like Adam and Eve in the Garden before there was any sin' (85). With the priest *in loco parentis* and addressed as Father, his abuse even carries faint hints of incest. Girls at the hostel adore him, deploring his wife's dowdy appearance: 'his wife is a brown bird and he is a peacock' (92), and in an echo of Halligan's opening story, the priest has, himself, shot the foxes whose pelts form the rug where he and Ros make love:

I think of dripping sticky on the foxes' fur but he doesn't seem to mind. There is beginning to grow a little bit of hair down there it is reddish too like the fox he says, my foxy love, not like the hair on my head which is really just pale brown. (86)

She keeps and hides his love letters in the red satin lining of her sewing basket, but, afraid of discovery, the priest expels Ros on a trumped up pretext, sending her home in disgrace where everyone accepts his judgment of her as a slut. The terrible damage inflicted continues to poison her adult life. After years of unhappy marriage, she escapes a brutal husband to protect herself and their children from further violence, but on learning that the priest who once abused her is now a bishop, she renews contact, so their relationship resumes. His letters continue and he even sends her the fox rug, though 'it smells of mothballs now and the skins are a bit dried and cracked'. He even leaves his wife for her, still talking of God's will and the baby he hopes Ros will bear: 'And now I am happy for the first time since being a child' (93). But the church intervenes and he resumes his marriage.

Another twenty years pass but all Ros's attempts to make a happy life have come to nothing. She writes again to the bishop who responds he is now too old — 'I can't be at this kind of thing any more' (94). She reflects: 'Forty years I am thinking it is now, since I was a child lying on a fox rug ... rubbing prickly in the red brushes of foxes. If he is too old now I was too young then' (94). With his letters as evidence, she reports him to the church authorities and he is defrocked: 'All the lovely robes, gone. All the godly clothes, taken off. Disgraced. *Expelled*' (95). She fears, however, she could still be trapped within the romantic dream, so if her lover asked to return, she might even agree. 'I say no, to myself, but I don't know. Together forever. Forever together. Yes' (95).

Such female defeat and abjection are completely banished in 'Polyhymnia', set in a secret, fertile valley among fruit trees and rose bushes. Here the trope of *locus amoenus*, the delightful place and perfect setting for love, which has descended through the centuries from Classical literature to the present day, is located in Australia, with thick lawn 'cropped green and fine and smooth by kangaroos' (138). Polyhymnia, Muse of sacred song, is the beautiful presiding deity, who seems to move in a blaze of light: 'Her hair is a bright orange colour, standing up in curling points all over her head, which seems to be covered with small dancing flames' (13). She devotes herself to hymn singing, particularly hymns infused with erotic feeling:

Jesu lover of my soul
Let me to thy bosom fly... (140)

A young man who enters the garden is entranced by Polyhymnia's beauty, believing he truly understands her — 'It is the song of the spinster, who thinks she is loving God but is needing a man' (140) — happily accepting her frank offer of sex: 'He knows he's a good lover, but she astonishes him' (140). Polyhymnia laughs, however, when he urges she stop singing 'her passionate hymns of love to God', replacing them with love songs to himself.

It's my career, she says. I like it. I'm good at it. You want your ordinary love poetry, you should see my sister Erato. But I have to tell you she's a bit of a prude. Her stuff's good, but she doesn't live up to it. And that mountain she lives on is so damn cold.

(142)

Erato, Muse of lyric poetry, was believed to inspire love poetry, but in 'Polyhymnia' Halligan presents, as her image of creativity, a woman with direct access to divine inspiration and no need of male mediation.

Polyhymnia and her garden paradise appear timeless, but other stories show characters swept along by Time which promises Eden while simultaneously undermining it. In 'Irregular Verbs' a young girl studying for her final school examination worries about a future likely to constrain her within the narrow life of social conformity advocated for women of her generation — early marriage and a life given over to housekeeping. Studying French irregular verbs offers a possible lifeline to an alternative future: 'irregular behaviour frowned on in girls but not in verbs' (153). 'Telling the beads' is set in a nursing home where an old woman takes refuge in memories of a beautiful antique necklace she once owned, associating individual beads with happy experiences of her youth. The past is now the ideal place where she chooses to live, ignoring her present existence and no longer able to recognise that her regular visitor, the 'shouting woman', is actually her fondly remembered daughter.

For some, Eden represents past experience, while for others it symbolises a promising future, but Halligan's final story 'Letters From Eden' invests it with an aura of fantasy, similar to the book's opening story, so that, between them, these two pieces neatly book-end *Shooting the Fox*. Siriminet, accompanying her newly appointed diplomat husband to Australia, writes her impressions of the place to her mother. The reader never learns her country of origin, but discovers it is cold and snow-bound, so Australia's warm climate, relaxed lifestyle and attractive landscape, appear quite delightful. Halligan's vision of an Australia governed from the New South Wales coastal town of Eden, transformed into an elegant, beautiful city, contrasts with the country presently governed from Canberra. In Siriminet's Australia education is highly valued, with special emphasis on foreign languages and literature, while the arts community appears larger than the bureaucracy. The prime minister, himself a poet, enjoys literary discussion and there is 'a charming habit of writers' always presenting him with each new book. But is this idealised Australia sufficiently dynamic to hold the interest of either residents or readers? Once again Halligan introduces the prospect of trouble, though whether this

originates in Eden or in Sirimenet's home country remains unclear. A mysterious final letter warns her mother she will be unable to correspond further: 'It is better that you not know anything' (223), and it appears she and her husband are now exiled forever from their original home. A new story begins to develop, one impossible to contain within the confines of this particular book.

Shooting the Fox is not a discontinuous narrative set entirely in one location with the same characters reappearing in different stories. It resembles rather a cycle of poems united by recurrent themes and imagery. In Halligan's opening story, Gloria observes a maze in the grounds surrounding her tower, learning that although its hedges are only waist high, 'you could still get lost in it' (7). She believes, however, that by looking down from the top of the tower she will eventually learn its pattern. Just as the pathway through a maze circles back on itself several times over, so individual stories in Halligan's book lead back to earlier ones while pointing to those ahead. In her tower, Gloria discovers an old chest, opening it with trepidation: 'Inside were old pieces of fabric smelling of peppermint. Ikat, and batik, brocades, embroidery. Most of them were old, some ancient, most had had another existence' (10). Halligan's stories resemble this collection of delicate fabrics. Malcolm is delighted to find Gloria looking at his 'treasure': 'All beautiful things need looking at' (10). *Shooting the Fox* emphasises that stories need to be told. Characters buttonhole listeners, demanding their tale be heard, and the stories fold in and out of one another, some drawing distantly on narratives and fables from much earlier periods.

The many observations about writing presented throughout *Shooting the Fox* underline the tensions involved in creating fiction. Readers frequently yearn for resolution and that some characters at least should live happily ever after. Accounts of 'happily ever after', however, are not in themselves especially interesting, so, although writers may imagine ideal states of existence, they must continually disrupt them so the narrative can develop. Consequently, there will always be trouble in Eden.

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