The Essential Workers: A Composite Novel

Volume Two: Exegesis

Essential Workers and the Composite Novel

Jane Turner Goldsmith
Department of English, Creative Writing, and Film

Submitted to the School of Humanities in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

At the University of Adelaide

1 October 2024

Contents

Abstract

My thesis comprises two components: a creative work entitled *The Essential Workers,* and an exegesis entitled *The Essential Workers: A Composite Novel.* The creative component is a composite novel set in a story-world inspired by the events of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, as they impacted on essential workers within the Australian community. The novel comprises 13 autonomous short stories featuring essential-worker characters, interwoven with the narrative of a recurring character. The stories share themes of the precarity of lives and livelihoods, both of which were exacerbated for workers at the frontline, due to risk of infection and workplace upheavals, and the pressures of service and duty versus responsibility to self, partners, and family. Many workers in healthcare, law enforcement, education, food provision, and service delivery were at risk of being disposable and dispensable despite their classification as essential. The exegetical component of the thesis explicates the context in which *The Essential Workers* was written and considers the suitability of the composite novel form to portray the diversity of voices responding to an event of significant social upheaval. Historical literary precursors to the composite novel from ancient to contemporary times include episodic narratives, short story cycles, sequences, and the narrative of community, which share common features such as autonomous stories, intertextuality and discontinuity in the 'whole'. These and other features are not unique to the composite but are salient in the reading experience. I discuss Carol Lefevre's composite novella *Murmurations* (2020) in terms of features that distinguish the form. Critics view the composite novel as being characterised by a "dynamic tension between the whole and its parts" (D'Hoker 28); they argue that it highlights opposing forces that tend towards or away from unity and coherence. The composite novel may as a result present a more fragmented experience for the reader, with less narrative unity, though this need not occur at the expense of aesthetic coherence.

Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree. The author acknowledges that copyright of published works contained within the thesis resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signed

1 October 2024

Chapter One: Essential Workers

L'essentiel était de bien faire son métier.[1]

--Albert Camus, *La Peste*

... though the plague was chiefly among the poor, yet were the poor the most venturous and fearless of it, and went about their employment with a sort of brutal courage.

--Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*

... we've been pushed into this front line "hero" role that none of us asked to be in or agreed to.

—doctor, qtd. in Roseanna Hunter et al., "The Workplace and Psychosocial Experiences of Australian Junior Doctors during the Covid-19 Pandemic"

[1] My translation: "The most important thing was to exercise one's profession and do it well."

Introduction

On the day the World Health Organisation announced a global pandemic, I was in Washington, D.C., visiting my son, and felt the full force of impending disaster. The panic was about not only coronavirus infection but whether we would be able to make it home to Australia. At a deserted Dulles Airport, we boarded a plane for Chicago; I was alarmed that the passenger next to me was wearing a mask. In the departure lounge for Auckland, I was shocked to see a man wearing full hazmat suit, face shield, and goggles. We eventually touched down at a subdued domestic airport two hours before mandatory quarantine for overseas arrivals came into effect, and—terrified of passing the virus to family members—self-isolated at home for two weeks. Then the national lockdown was enforced. These no longer extraordinary events were the starting point for this thesis, comprising the creative work and this exegesis. Safely able to work from home, I reflected on the predicament of others at the frontline of the emergency response to the pandemic: workers ensuring the health and safety of the rest of the community. The project I envisaged was to write fictionalised stories of the lives of essential worker characters and combine them into a composite text. In this introductory chapter I explicate the context of that project, elucidating its genesis, background influences, and creative inspiration; the range of research I undertook; and the decisions I made in choosing a form. In chapter two, I consider the composite novel as a suitable form to represent the multiple perspectives of characters responding to an event of significant social upheaval.

My professional experiences as a psychologist, teacher of languages, and fiction writer also served to generate ideas for this project. Over the span of my career, I have connected with people of all ages: pre-school children and their parents, school-age to university-age students, Australian adoptive parents of children born overseas, international students, and employees in the workplace. At the onset of the pandemic, as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

counsellor, I became interested in the lives of workers delivering essential services, and how the unprecedented pressures of the pandemic and the additional risks these individuals had to take would affect their work and personal lives. Essential workers for me displayed a particular kind of courage. They had to sacrifice safety, comfort, and contact with loved ones to fulfil their professional responsibilities, whether that was serving at a supermarket checkout or monitoring a patient intubated on a ventilator. At the same time as being essential, many were also invisible to the general community. Some became 'dispensable' as quickly as they had become 'essential'. It was their identities as workers, and how at times this 'duty' conflicted with their personal, behind-the-scenes lives and relationships, that I wanted to explore in stories.

Who Are the Essential Workers?

The category of 'essential worker' emerged almost overnight, it seemed, in political and popular discourse, following the detection of the first case of the novel coronavirus in Australia on 25 January 2020.[2] It was not until the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, though, that the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defined the essential worker as: "a worker of crucial importance within a particular field or enterprise; now *esp*, an employee who provides a vital public service within a community, especially in the police, health, transport, or education sectors".[3] Although references to essential workers appeared as early as 1855 in newspapers[4]

[2] For facts pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia I have drawn on two sources: Anika Stobart and Stephen Duckett's paper analysing Australia's response to the first two waves of Covid in 2020 contains a chronology of events and a discussion of strategic successes and failures. I also consulted *Fire Flood Plague*, a 2020 essay collection edited by Sophie Cunningham, which gives an overview of events as they affected the community at the onset of the pandemic.

[3] See particularly the entry's "Meaning and Use" section ("Essential Worker").

[4] The *Oxford English Dictionary* ("Essential Worker") quotes an August 1855 article in the *New York Evangelist*: "The teacher is an essential worker in the right training of every young community."

and government publications,[5] contemporary perceptions of them grew largely from the daily media cycle and stories that highlighted the vulnerability and hardship that affected this category of workers in particular. At least five of the stories in my creative artefact were directly inspired by media reports: "Chicken" explores exploitation of retail workers ("Anxious, Overwhelmed, Abused"); "Floral Arrangements" seeks to depict physical and psychological exhaustion of aged care nurses (McCarthy); "Roadkill" highlights the impact of border closures affecting truck drivers (Cassidy); "Steady White Light" reveals the hardships experienced by workers engaged in fast-food bicycle courier delivery ("By Tuesday") and their prevailing risks of injury or death (Begley); and "Bin Chickens" takes as inspiration the media story of a man who was fined for sitting on a park bench eating a kebab during lockdown (McGowan and Smee).

I turned initially to government sources to devise a list of occupations on which to base my characters for the creative artefact. At the onset of the pandemic, essential workers were not defined in Australian Commonwealth legislation.[6] Essential 'services' were more clearly articulated, associated with emergency legislation, though this varied between the states. For example, the South Australian Emergency Act (1981) defines essential services as those "without which the safety, health or welfare of the community or a section of the community would be endangered or seriously prejudiced."[7] The Essential Services Act of New South Wales (1988) specifies a list of essential services: those needed for the distribution of food, fuel, water, power, public transportation and freight, public health such as hospitals, ambulances, and pharmaceuticals, fire-fighting, garbage collection, sanitary cleaning, sewerage, and for the

[5] Here, the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("Essential Worker") quotes future Australian prime minister Arthur Calwell in 1949, when he was Australia's inaugural immigration minister: "Nominated migrants … are classed as essential workers for Australian industry, [etc]."
[6] This was pointed out in April 2020 in a factsheet on essential services produced by the Law Council of Australia and Australian Medical Association.
[7] This essential services definition is based on the International Labour Organization's: "those the interruption of which would endanger the life, personal safety or health of the whole or part of the population."

conduct of welfare institutions and prisons.[8] Historically, legislation of this kind was intended to ensure continuity of services affecting public health, safety, and well-being during crises such as wars or labour disputes; in some countries, legislation limits the rights of workers to strike in emergency situations.[9]

The term 'frontline worker' refers to employees in public-facing roles: those who physically report to their jobs. The *OED* defines frontline worker as "of a person: working at the forefront of an organization's public activity, typically as the point of direct contact with customers, clients, users..." Frontline workers faced a heightened risk of life-threatening coronavirus infection at the start of the pandemic when vaccines were not yet developed; this was observed early in the pandemic with health workers in China (Xuecun 9). In Australia, too, there was a threefold increase in infection risk among healthcare workers in the first six months of the pandemic (Quigley et al. 1). Not all public-facing workers are essential and not all essential workers are also frontline. I have chosen to use the broader term 'essential worker' in this thesis, to include workers performing critical services 'behind the scenes' such as food delivery couriers and truck drivers, whose jobs still placed them at risk due to pandemic factors during the first year of COVID-19 (Bogle; Cassidy).

Based on these initial classifications I created essential-worker characters working in the fields of healthcare, food provision and delivery, law enforcement, cleaning services, and education. They ranged from poorly paid casual workers to well-paid but over-worked healthcare professionals. While most characters are frontline essential workers, I also featured workers such as a contact tracer—an essential pandemic-related role--and others not technically

[8] Law enforcement was not specifically included in the list at "Appendix A" in the LCA and AMA's factsheet, which may be an oversight.

[9] ILO's labour legislation guidelines note some possible exclusions from the right to strike: "In some countries, all workers enjoy the right to strike, in both the public and private sectors and irrespective of the impact on the public interest of a work stoppage in their establishment. In other countries, the right to strike is denied to public servants or to employees in *essential services*. In many countries, strikes can be prohibited in emergency situations" (International Labour Organization; emphasis added).

essential yet serving the most basic of human needs to communicate and receive comfort in a crisis, such as a florist and a massage therapist.[10] My final list for protagonists in the stories, or appearing within them, comprised the following characters: police officer, supermarket assistant, food-delivery bicycle courier, truck driver, florist, aged-care nurse, nursing-home orderly, primary-school teacher, paramedic, mobile road-service mechanic, cleaner, massage therapist, emergency doctor, and contract tracer. I was not able to represent all categories of essential workers. Missing are garbage collectors and undertakers, whose work roles also became riskier and more complex during the pandemic. In *The Essential Workers* I include two recurring characters, neither of them essential workers, but who both connect with the above characters over the course of the novel, and in particular in its concluding sections.

A central theme in each story of the composite novel is the provision of 'Psychological First Aid'--hereafter PFA.[11] The PFA framework originates from the field of disaster psychology; I first encountered it in my role as an EAP counsellor. PFA is defined as the provision of support that conveys responses of *safety, calm, connection, self-efficacy,* and *hope* to individuals affected by disaster.[12] The pandemic threatened physical health and worsened psychological health for much of the community; but as mentioned above, essential workers at the frontline were especially vulnerable to contagion in the early waves of the pandemic.[13] Any threat to life is associated with a risk of trauma to the individual, and the pandemic's threat to these workers was not unlike the trauma caused by natural disasters such as floods and fires.[14] The company I worked for provided employee assistance services to volunteers in the South

[10] I completed an online training course to inform the story "Contact Tracing"; for more information see the media release for the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.
[11] These principles are outlined in the 2020 pamphlet *Psychological First Aid: Supporting People Affected by Disaster in Australia* produced by the Australian Red Cross and Australian Psychological Society.
[12] PFA is a practice-based framework of response that does not claim to prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PFA consists of humane responses that respect the autonomy of the individual in the disaster context (Bass et al. 247).
[13] See Susan Rossell et al. for an overview of mental health in the general Australian population during the pandemic.
[14] My Disaster Response Training through the Australian Psychological Society included a component addressing pandemics as an environmental disaster that can lead to trauma.

Australian Country Fire Service, using the PFA protocol, in the aftermath of severe bushfires over the summer of 2019 and early 2020, pre-dating the pandemic by only a few weeks. In my professional experience, I found clients affected by such natural disasters responded favourably to PFA. People experiencing trauma are comforted by the provision of basic aid: someone to listen, provide reassurance, clarify options, activate the individual's personal family and community resources, and instil hope even in the darkest of times. The collaboration empowers people to take back control. In the initial conception of my project, I wanted to explore the PFA principles in creative writing about the pandemic, focusing on the vulnerabilities and hardships that affected essential workers. I sought to highlight dilemmas about duty and professionalism, personal safety, and responsibility to family members or partners. My intent was to incorporate a motif of 'aid' in my short-story scenarios through representations of simple, humane actions. By capturing instances of connection, hope, and self-efficacy, I aimed to explore how these actions might in some ways redress suffering.

As for many fiction writers, my starting point for the creation of fictional characters is observation and encounters with real people. For example, through my roles in educational settings, as teacher and psychologist, I knew how frequently teachers are assaulted by students, and how as a result they feel conflicted about their duty of care and dedication to their roles. Through my counselling role on-site at a mine in a remote region of South Australia, I became acquainted with the high rate of relationship breakdown experienced by Fly-in-Fly-Out (FIFO) workers; this parallels the truck driving industry, where long-haul drivers have to spend long periods of time away from family. As mentioned above, some of my stories were inspired by media reports of hardship, and others from 'overheard' fragments. For example, during Melbourne's second COVID-19 wave I became aware of the challenges faced by the daughter of a friend, a junior doctor working in emergency at a major hospital and surviving months of isolation and separation from her partner and family. In developing my stories, these ideas

formed a basis for imagining the behind-the-scenes lives of essential workers during the first year of the pandemic. I utilised a range of additional resources and research methods to deepen their characterisation.

For the purposes of explicating the sources of inspiration and background research for these characters, I present in detail below two essential-worker characters and the two recurring characters, whose lives weave together throughout the course of the composite novel.

Junior Emergency Doctor: "Holding the Air"

A central idea for the story "Holding the Air" came from a reading of one story in Tim O'Brien's composite novel *The Things They Carried* (1990). In "On the Rainy River" a fictional Tim O'Brien evades being conscripted in the war against Vietnam by fleeing to Canada (47). The story is a searing evocation of shame and questions ideals of duty, sacrifice and courage. "This is one story I've never told", confesses its protagonist (39). I reflected on parallels in the context of the pandemic: workers such as doctors, who were 'called to duty' under emergency services provisions as for periods of war or natural disaster, risking their lives through increased exposure to the virus. These workers were expected to display selflessness, sacrifice, and courage, enacting the 'hero' or 'warrior' role—in their case, by working long shifts in high-risk environments and without adequate rest.[15] From my years as a university counsellor I was already aware of the workplace culture of "presenteeism"[16] which adversely affects the well-being of medical interns in hospital settings. Through this role I had background insights

[15] Scholars have extended these military metaphors to apply to the emergency service context. In her chapter on "Covid and Essential Workers" Marina Levina argues: "Essentiality is intimately tied to the metaphors of war and sacrifice" (82); "once the body is marked as essential it can be sacrificed for the supposed good of the economy" (89). The essential but "disposable" worker is rationalised in this way, made somehow more "palatable" to decision makers (80). Catriona Cox in the UK and Zahra Khan et al. in the US have also commented on the problematic ascribing of 'hero' status to healthcare workers.

[16] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines presenteeism as: "The fact or condition of being present, esp. at work; (British) (a) the practice of working more hours than is required by one's terms of employment."

into the pressures faced by final-year medical students moving into their first roles in training hospitals. I explored these conflicts in "Holding the Air".

I consulted a range of additional sources to understand how the pandemic exacerbated prevailing workplace tensions. Compared to other countries, Australia experienced a relatively low death rate in the first wave, but hospitals—and intensive care units in particular—still operated under extraordinary and unprecedented pressures (Stobart and Duckett 96). Nursing staff shortages resulting in an "insufficient skill mix" for ICU units were reported in the second wave in Victoria (Topple 84). The critical shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) was criticised as one of Australia's shortcomings in pandemic preparation (Stobart and Duckett 102). Other shortfalls in Australia's response to the pandemic in hospitals and nursing homes are captured in surveys of junior doctors and other healthcare workers. Stories of the overwhelming strain on ICU staff and problems with PPE also filtered through the media (McCarthy; Om; Lloyd). In *The Care Factor* (2021), Ailsa Wild documents the impact of COVID on the work and personal life of her friend, a nurse who had to rapidly re-train to work in intensive care units in Melbourne hospitals at the onset of the pandemic. These observations also informed my story.

Roseanna Hunter's survey of junior doctors in hospitals in Victoria, which suffered a severe second wave of COVID in June 2020, was of particular relevance to the ideas in my story. Questioned about the "main Covid-19 challenge", one young doctor summarised her feelings: "uncertainty, inability to escape, all-consuming anxiety" (750). The survey results highlight the "overwhelming increase in workload", with few opportunities for respite, which led to emotional exhaustion (746). Junior doctors experienced anxiety and distress about many things: the threat of infection, both for themselves and for family or partners; the quality of patient care; and the rapid deterioration of their patients. As many staff were furloughed, these doctors felt the pressure to undertake (unpaid) overtime and expressed guilt about "burdening"

their colleagues if they took leave (748). Junior doctors rejected the 'hero' label. One doctor wrote: "we've been pushed into this front line 'hero' role that none of us asked to be in or agreed to" (750). These healthcare 'saviours'—the appellation recalling the New Zealand nurse who famously 'saved' the life of Boris Johnson (Booth)—experienced "moral distress", citing "isolation", "invisibility" and "undervaluing" in their workplaces, and unsupportive care by their supervisors (751). Moral injury or distress is defined as "psychological stress resulting from an act, or omission of an act from a leadership figure that betrays one's moral or ethical code" (Gaitens 3). Junior doctors in Hunter's survey felt abandoned by their supervisors. This aligns with reports that not all healthcare staff displayed 'heroic' actions in the first waves of the pandemic or supported their junior colleagues. I accessed a podcast from the School of Political and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, which discussed pandemic inequalities in the first wave of the pandemic in different settings. There is an example mentioned in the podcast of medical consultants fighting over who should enter the intensive-care isolation room of the coronavirus patient. On many occasions, the consultants deferred to intensive care nurses who found themselves, suddenly, also delivering food trays, since the food caterers refused. The refrain *we are all in this together* that I introduce in the second story, "Chicken" quickly became a platitude against the reality in certain workplaces.

I drew together these ideas of heroism, sacrifice and courage for the story "Holding the Air", contrasting them with the conflicts of desertion of duty and shame. I used the doctor's oath of *do no harm* as a refrain in the story, highlighting the professional obligation of doctors to patient care, which for my purposes aligns with the principle of *safety* in PFA. In my story, I wanted to explore what might happen when a highly principled young doctor with a strong sense of duty to her profession is thwarted by overwhelming demand. What happens when that doctor cannot ensure the safety of her patients, even if those factors are outside her control—especially when little supervision was available for procedures such as checking the medication

dosage for a critically ill patient, or managing resuscitation? My intention was to leave "Holding the Air" as an open-ended story, to underline the lack of solutions to the acute problems that was exacerbated by COVID in healthcare settings, and the moral injury which may be felt by junior doctors while the culture of presenteeism within those settings prevails.

In this story I utilised the creative writing technique of immersing myself in the environment I wanted to capture. This technique draws on psychogeographical approaches to creativity that link the physical space with emotional and behavioural responses in the individual perceiver.[17] Sonia Overall writes that: "while walking, writers can harvest ideas and ruminate on them; gather found text and speech, glimpses of narrative, images that contain a poem. We can sharpen our skills—of description, evocation of atmosphere, detailing minutiae, making connections—to give greater authenticity to our writing" ("Current" 26). In Nigel Krauth's analysis, "the fiction writer exists in an ecosystem of mind, body and world" (187). The "investigable real world" is the fourth of five "domains" he identifies in the writing process. This 'mobile' experience of engaging the senses and triggering the imagination is a common activity for fiction writers.[18] For my story, I wanted to experience, personally, what it might be like to be in the doctor's shoes, walking out on the job. Like my character, I walked from the

[17] The *OED* entry on "Psychogeography" defines it as: "The study of the influence of geographical environment on the mind, behaviour, etc.; geography considered in regard to its psychological effects." Sonia Overall references Guy Debord, whose work in the 1950s was foundational in this domain.

[18] A full discussion of immersive approaches to creativity and the fiction writing process is beyond the scope of this exegesis but I provide here some comments on the influential resources I accessed to contextualise this creative writing practice. Overall's article summarises the field, integrating theory with practical activities and examples; she has also published a 2021 craft manual, *Walk Write (Repeat).* Krauth conceptualises the fiction writing process as a series of planes or domains in and on which the writer works, and which, through interaction, create a "product" (193). He states: "Writing is a body thing, focussed either more or less internally or externally. Writing fiction is writing the body's actions, observations and memories. What the body does or observes, the mind can reconstruct; what the mind can reconstruct, the hand can write" (189). Krauth acknowledges that writers can only construct from their own experience and perspective. He comments on his own practice of engaging in real-world observation to generate ideas for fictional stories (189). Tony Williams considers the space that walking affords—in his case, with his dog—for ideas to germinate and develop (225). Social scientist researchers at Stanford University have also confirmed the benefits of walking in promoting divergent thinking (Oppezzo and Schwartz 1142). Emma Seppala cites numerous anecdotes of significant scientific discoveries that arose following walking and daydreaming, among them Tesla's rotating magnetic fields and Kekulé's structure of benzene (98). I also drew on the practical suggestions and ideas of Tim Ingold, Rebecca Solnit and Ferris Jabr in developing this immersive creative writing practice.

public hospital in my city, noting details in the hospital environment and the feelings it evoked. I boarded a tram, noting the surroundings, including the signs advising to hold on for safety and the penalties for not holding a valid ticket. These descriptive and sensory elements found their way into the story.

Long-Haul Truck Driver: "Roadkill"

As the pandemic unfolded, media reports began to reveal the hardships affecting essential workers other than healthcare workers. Retail staff were overwhelmed ("Anxious, Overwhelmed, Abused"), casual hospitality were laid off (Terzon and Hutchens), forensic cleaners were deluged with requests to deep clean, and "cleansing teams" were tasked with the then very risky work of sanitising public spaces and managing the disposal of abandoned face masks (Amin). From government sources and public health reports I sourced information about the impact on education and law enforcement.[19] Schools were in a state of flux, though this varied between the states; most schools in Victoria and NSW closed and teachers taught online during lockdowns (Stobart and Duckett 96). In South Australia, schools remained open for the children of essential workers and vulnerable children under state care.[20] Without support, contract teachers found themselves having to manage programs for students both at home and in nearly empty schools, while their more senior colleagues—who had job security and benefits—were quick to take their leave entitlements (Taylor). Police officers were deployed to new tasks and responsibilities (Mazerolle and Ransley 317). They now had to operate border checkpoints, stand guard in hotel quarantine facilities, fine people for being out during

[19] See the Australian Government Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement report of June 2021 on the changed role of police; and for the impact on schools and later school refusal trends, see the Australian Government Senate Education and Employment and References Committee report of August 2023.
[20] I learnt the specific situation for schools in South Australia during the first waves of the pandemic through my own workplace contact with education staff.

lockdown and enforce other unpopular public health mandates, such as social distancing and masks (McGowan and Smee). They could be drawn into confrontations that led to an increase in assaults on police, for example spitting and coughing by people being detained for breaches of new mandates.[21] These conditions meant radically transformed workplaces and abruptly increased responsibilities, as well as staff shortages; many fell ill or 'burnt out', all of which added to the significant strain under which these workers had to report for duty.

These reports generated ideas for stories of workers under significantly transforming occupational circumstances. Additionally, state border closures affected the ability of some workers to fulfil their job functions, for example in relation to the freighting of supplies across borders. For the story "Roadkill" I utilised a range of resources as well as an on-site visit to a long-haul trucking company in Adelaide. Following ethics clearance, I interviewed the company's human resources manager and a long-haul truck driver and inspected a B-double truck. I consulted Jann Karp's 2014 sociology of Australian truck drivers, *Truckies: Life Behind the Wheel,* and followed media reports and chat groups to familiarise myself with 'truckie vernacular'.[22] Karp provides an insightful analysis of the factors that make truck driving such a risky and high-stress profession. Among them are the pressures drivers feel about the regulatory culture, time constraints, absence from partners and family, risks relating to sexual opportunism on the road, fatigue, lack of exercise, poor diet, and drugs, as well as vehicle mechanical problems and traffic hazards. These factors threaten the health, safety, and well-being of drivers. Karp's observations aligned with my experience counselling workers on-site at a remote mine in South Australia, including mining engineers, administration staff, construction workers, and truck drivers. My interviews with the trucking company personnel confirmed the

[21] The Australian Government Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement included this finding in its June 2021 report (5.21-5.22).
[22] I accessed the glossary published by trucking company National Heavy Haulage, along with similar sites.

perception that the pandemic served to exacerbate the economic, interpersonal, and psychological impacts of the pandemic for drivers. Long-haul drivers faced complex and constantly changing state border restrictions and struggles to get tested that affected critical delivery of supplies, and consequently their pay. From the visit I experienced a new-found admiration for the high risk, indispensable, yet invisible work that truck drivers perform in delivering essential supplies to communities. I was touched to read a thank-you letter from a school in the far regions of the state displayed at the entrance to the manager's office; the letter had been written on receipt of a delivery of critical medical and sanitary supplies after weeks of lockdown. Many of the details shared by my interviewees found their way into "Roadkill" and I believe helped to texture the characterisation of Reddy. I wanted to convey authenticity of voice and to draw a character who had to balance the real tensions of family obligation with the isolation, frustration, loneliness, and boredom associated with life on the road. Reddy has realistically flawed behaviours and attitudes which may appear clumsy, insensitive, sexist or racist, yet he also demonstrates characteristics such as concern for family, mates and animals on the road, like the truck driver I interviewed.

To 'find' this story—as with the other stories—I reflected on the principles of Psychological First Aid in relation to character, setting, and the context of the pandemic. I considered possibilities that might arise from expanding on the principles of *safety, calm, connection, self-efficacy,* and *hope*. For "Roadkill" the PFA principles of *self-efficacy* and *connection* gave rise to an idea of using one's expertise to assist others. Despite misgivings related to his low self-confidence, Reddy is able to provide online help to the isolated international student. In another story, "Floral Arrangements", the dialogue cross-references Reddy's desire to make amends to the unknown child owner of the cat he accidentally kills on the road. I wanted to include cross-references between stories to connect the characters and build narrative coherence for the reader.

Recurring Characters

Recurring characters often feature in short story cycles and composite novels, functioning to enhance narrative coherence in the whole text. In *The Essential Workers* I included two such characters. They are not essential workers themselves but are affected by the actions of the other essential-worker characters and, in the case of the character Edwina, serve to connect the other characters.

The primary recurring character Edwina was based on a real person: my grandmother, born in 1912, who received her master's degree at the age of 94. Her determination to achieve the education that was denied her by the circumstances of her difficult life is legendary in the family. Edwina is a mature-age student in her 60s attempting to revive an arts degree from the 1970s. I envisaged a character who was superficially self-sufficient and yet very much alone, difficult and manipulative, her own worst enemy in terms of her attitudes and behaviours towards others, estranged from family, and preferring animals to people. I wanted a character who discovers she is vulnerable to the isolation and privations of the pandemic. Edwina is a creation sparked from these initial ideas and built from her interactions with the secondary recurring character, Joo, and the essential-worker characters.

Joo is an 18-year-old student newly arrived in Australia from South Korea at the start of first semester in 2020. Her characterisation was based on my years of interaction in the university counselling service with students from South Korea. International students—who in Australian universities come predominantly from China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, and Vietnam—present frequently to counselling, and my eight years in the role gave me insights into the heightened vulnerability and the stressors they faced. I subsequently took a position as a university-based co-ordinator of a volunteer program for international students, working with students from the above-mentioned countries and collaborating with colleagues

from India, China, Singapore, and Taiwan. Over four years I matched community volunteers with international students, who would meet for regular language practice and cultural exchange. In my experience, I found international students often referenced strong parental pressure to achieve highly, studying for degrees that were not always their own choice. I had frequent conversations about anxiety relating to sacrifices they felt their parents had made for them, and their fears of disappointing parents and bringing shame to the family. Sometimes this led to estrangement from parents, when their own goals and life plans diverged from parental expectations. Accommodation and job-related concerns also surfaced, alerting me to the vulnerability of international students to exploitation by landlords and employers. These elements I blended into Joo's persona and developed in her interactions with Edwina. I envisaged Joo as a foil for Edwina and a catalyst for Edwina's eventual epiphanies. In Joo I sought to develop a character who had withstood hardship and whose estrangement from her own family and isolation were exacerbated by the pandemic. For context, it should be remembered that Australia's international borders closed on 20 March 2020 (Cunningham xi), around the commencement of first semester in 2020, leaving many international students in a state of limbo vis-à-vis their education and casual employment in Australia. In the opening scenes of *The Essential Workers*, Joo arrives in Australia to this uncertain context, when quarantine and other public health directives were not yet mandated and communications from authorities, including universities, were perturbed.

I intentionally withheld details of the backstories for my characters, wanting to offer suggestion and clues yet leaving them open-ended. In theory this quality of indeterminacy allows the reader the space to infer their own explanations for character behaviour. An undefined backstory was the case for Joo and for Ishak, the fast-food delivery courier. Migrant workers in Australia on temporary visas faced social, economic, and health inequities during the pandemic (Walsh 12); significant numbers lost their regular jobs—in hospitality, for

example—due to the economic downturn of the pandemic (14). Some found their way into low-paying gig work as drivers and food couriers: work that is inherently dangerous (Gregory 316) and until very recently, lacking employer protections; several cases involving serious injury or death of delivery cyclists are coming before the courts (Begley; "By Tuesday"). The international border closures caused hardship and heartache for many on temporary visas that were in some cases expiring. I wanted to highlight these aspects of vulnerability in the case of Ishak, in "Steady White Light". Ishak's personal circumstances are vague. He is known as 'Joe' to his 'boss' Barry, who exploits his wariness of authorities and unwillingness to disclose his identity. From hints in the story—for example his ability to see acutely at night, or his startle reaction to fireworks—the reader might infer a traumatic background associated with fleeing conflict.[23] I did not want to designate his home country. The background dilemma I wanted to evoke was Ishak's precarity once international borders closed, which made it impossible for him to leave Australia yet also to remain and work legally. For Ishak's characterisation, I gained inspiration from informal sources such as the newsletters of not-for-profit organisations such as Médécins Sans Frontières, which highlighted personal stories of refugees from countries such as Myanmar, Afghanistan, or Burundi. I also ran ideas by an immigration lawyer in my network, seeking plausible case scenarios.

Similarly, I intended for Joo's backstory to be opaque, with hints of an estrangement from her own family in South Korea, and the factors behind this separation in turn being indeterminate. I researched young Korean women who had to relinquish babies for adoption, as one possible scenario.[24] Earlier in my career I worked for a government adoption agency, assessing the suitability of prospective adoptive parents to adopt from countries with which

[23] Hypervigilance and exaggerated startle response are among the symptoms on the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire for the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Berthold et al. 471).
[24] South Koreans refer to themselves as Korean, as colleagues informed me when I was working with international students.

Australia had an arrangement, predominantly India, China, Taiwan, and South Korea.[25] Twenty-five years ago, I was struck by the lack of space provided on the form for the relinquishing mother to express her wishes for her child. The brief information I would read was stark and striking, expressing a mother's powerful desire to provide for her child as best as possible, given the circumstances. From this role, I learnt that Korean babies are more likely to be cared for by foster mothers and not in orphanages in their first critical year of life— allowing for the possibility, in my hypothetical story scenario, of a future reunion between mother and child. These ideas were seeds in the development of Joo's backstory. I needed to find out if it was still the case that young Korean women are under family pressure to relinquish their babies. I consulted online sources including the Korean Adoptees in Australia Network which provided a history of Korean-Australian adoption. Sun Hee Engelstoft's moving documentary *Forget-Me-Not* confirmed that most adoptions now take place within Korea. In 2019 Engelstoft depicts scenarios of families avoiding shame by sending their daughters to safe houses to give birth and relinquish their babies, 'out of sight'. Hypothetically, as in my scenario, this could be overseas as a student once the adoption or fostering of the child has been arranged. *Forget-Me-Not* was a valuable resource for Joo's backstory, in terms of the young age of Engelstoft's interviewees, and other aspects, such as relationships with authorities, family and peers, communication, expressed feelings and attitudes, and psychological strengths. Engelstoft makes effective use of long periods of silence in filming tense meetings between parents and daughters, mediated by social workers, and underlining their estrangement. I wanted to explore the leaving of gaps and silences both within stories and in the discontinuous form of the composite novel. I intentionally do not make Joo's backstory explicit but plant these ideas as sketchy possibilities. Edwina fabricates her own theory about why Joo is in Australia, surmising

[25] From the end of the Korean War (1953), children from Korea were adopted into Australian families. Formal inter-country adoption programs between Korea and Australia existed between 1991 and 2003 ("Korean Transnational Adoption"). There are cultural and ethical dilemmas associated with intercountry adoptions, and it is not surprising that numbers have now declined to virtually zero in Australia.

that she has remained in contact and will return to South Korea to look after her child. Given the (also intentional) unreliability of Edwina as narrator, it is a tenuous scenario, though not completely implausible. In the characterisation of Joo my main goal was to portray resilience and determination in the face of extreme life challenge. Joo is naive in a foreign country and benefits from Edwina's rash offer of accommodation; they are two lonely characters who find each other.

My intention in writing *The Essential Workers* was to combine autonomous stories into a composite novel that would portray the impact of the pandemic through the multiple perspectives of diverse characters. I asked myself: why *this* form? What are its characteristics and its affordances, given its discontinuity? I also wanted to understand the reader's experience: whether and how they would make meaning and be able to construct a narrative and aesthetic whole from a series of shorter stories. These questions I address in chapter two.

Chapter Two: Form and Function of the Composite Novel

The golden bird will not always sing the same song, though a primeval pattern underlies its notes.

--Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

A work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers.

--Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question*

There is such a thing as "order" in art but not a single column of a Greek temple fulfills its order perfectly, and artistic rhythm may be said to exist in the rhythm of prose disrupted.

--Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*

The Form

In its simplest conception, a composite novel is a series of linked short stories that forms a novel. As Rolf Lundén has noted, it combines elements from two established literary genres: the short story and the novel (32). The composite novel is characterised by certain structural features such as discontinuity between the autonomous texts that comprise it. Since discontinuity may also be present in novels not considered composites, one might distinguish it in this way: the composite novel has certain features that are not unique to it, but which are especially salient or noticeable in the reading experience. Margot Kelley observes that the reader's interaction with a composite text ("novel-in-stories" for Kelley) "differs" to her experience with "a more conventional novel or a short story collection" (297).[26] In his preface to *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*, Peter Gill speaks of the short story cycle as affording two opposing "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces for the reader: terms borrowed from physics, which theorists have applied in philosophy and literature (1). For Mikhail Bakhtin, a "centripetal" force is one that "strives to make things cohere", while a "centrifugal" force "seeks to keep things apart" (19). These impulses towards and away from coherence are observable in the composite novel. The composite novel may as a result present a more fragmented experience with less narrative unity, though this need not occur at the expense of aesthetic coherence for the reader. In this chapter I describe the main features of the composite novel and those it shares with the short story cycle, focussing on those features I have explored creatively in my artefact *The Essential Workers*. I draw on the work of theorists who have attempted to define the composite novel, and provide illustrative examples from

[26] As I discuss in detail in this chapter, there is overlap between short story cycles and composite novels, and the scholarly criticism that applies to cycles is also relevant in interpretating and understanding the composite novel.

selected contemporary composite novels, primarily Australian author Carol Lefevre's *Murmurations* (2020).[27]

Composite Novels: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Models

According to Lundén, variations of the episodic narrative have existed since the "first long prose forms" in the history of humanity (7). Lundén characterises the Icelandic sagas and the epics of Turkmenistan as "short story composites" and notes that the form comprising shorter texts has survived in both Western and Eastern cultures almost continuously to the present day (7). Viktor Shklovsky notes two unifying features that appear in ancient and medieval composite forms: "threading", the presence of a continuous narrator or "journey" thread (69); and "framing"—the enclosing of one story within another—or having one story (often a prologue) serve as a frame for the remaining stories (65). Threading is evident in the presence of a protagonist in early medieval composite works such as *A Thousand and One Nights,*[28] and framing is present in fourteenth-century works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*[29] and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron.*[30] In the introduction to her volume on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American short story cycles, Michelle Pacht comments on the "sporadic" appearance of these kinds of composites as evidence that the form was not firmly established until later in the nineteenth century (3). Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris

[27] I am limiting myself to texts from Australia, Britain, and North America in this chapter, but this does not discount the fact that composite forms from many other countries have existed for many centuries.
[28] *A Thousand and One Nights* is regarded as a composite work of uncertain date and authorship, consisting of stories from the Middle East and India whose first known reference dates from the ninth century. In the framing story the protagonist, Shahrazad—often spelled Scheherazade in Western translations—tells a tale each night to delay her execution by the king (Lyons and Lyons *vii-vii*).
[29] *The Canterbury Tales,* written between 1387 and 1400 by Geoffrey Chaucer, is a set of stories framed by a prologue and told by a group of pilgrims passing the time on their journey to and from Canterbury. It is an example in the English tradition (Dunn and Morris 21).
[30] Another fourteenth-century Italian work, Giovanni Bocaccio's *The Decameron* is a series of tales, also framed by a prologue and epilogue, told by seven young women accompanied by three noblemen who are fleeing the Black Death in Florence in 1348 (Boccaccio 1-3).

attempted a definition of the composite novel in 1995, also noting the emergence of precursors in late-nineteenth century collected narratives such as Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and in the early twentieth century, story cycles such as James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) (xix). For many critics, the publication of the latter two texts coincides chronologically with the advent of Modernism, when texts that repudiated the prevailing conventions of the late Victorian novel emerged. Michael Bell comments in his introduction *to The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* that the "fragmenting" of "unities" regarding character and plot in literature were the "preoccupation" of the times, and were reflected across music, art, and architecture (3). Texts from this period are characterised by looser forms, a resistance to closure in favour of open-endedness, a move away from strict chronological or linear progression, and novel techniques such as stream of consciousness and unreliable narration, all of which challenged formal tradition (Castle 22). These features are also present in more recent composite novels; some critics view Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* (2006) as a neo-Modernist novel.[31]

The contemporary composite novel thus has rich literary resonances from ancient and medieval periods. J. Gerald Kennedy, among other critics, points to the "proliferation" of the short story cycle since 1900 (xi), and Elke D'Hoker claims its newer incarnations "constitute something of a trend in contemporary literature" (17). In this chapter, alongside Lefevre's *Murmurations*, I provide brief illustration from nine novels published between 1980 and 2018, which D'Hoker and other critics reference as composite novels, and which demonstrate the form's main characteristic features. All have received critical attention as examples of the form. Alice Munro's *The Beggar Maid* (1980), first published as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), comprises 10 autonomous short stories starting with the youthful character Rose and following her life, with temporal gaps between stories. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of*

[31] Monica Latham analyses *Arlington Park* (2006) as a neo-Modernist novel and discusses its similarities with Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

Brewster Place (1982) comprises seven autonomous short stories set in the locale of the run-down Brewster Place. Through cross-referencing, the novel presents the perspectives of several recurring Black female characters. Susan Kenney's *In Another Country* (1984) is a novel comprising seven autonomous short stories told by a continuous first-person narrator, Sara, with temporal gaps between stories. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) comprises 22 autonomous stories, set variously in, before, or after the war in Vietnam. Some stories are told in the first person by a fictional Tim O'Brien, others by an unnamed participant/narrator. Characters recur and are cross-linked. Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) is a novel structured as five discrete sections, each a response from five characters to a tragic occurrence at an inner-city hotel. Justin Cronin's *Mary and O'Neil* (2002) comprises eight autonomous, inter-connected stories exploring themes of loss and grief through the lives of an American family. There is no linear plot, and alternating narrators take large temporal leaps between stories. In Cusk's *Arlington Park* (2006) five stay-at-home mothers in the fictional middle-class London suburb of Arlington Park meet and recount their separate lives over the course of one wet day. There are 10 discrete sections, temporal simultaneity, and cross-linked events and characters. Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2009) is set in a story-world loosely based on the state of Maine in the United States. The eponymous Olive Kitteridge features as narrator/protagonist or background character in 13 autonomous stories. Lastly, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011) comprises 13 autonomous stories with cross-linked characters. There is no single linear plot, but instead chronological and geographical discontinuity. Novels that informed my analysis and my creative ideas, but which are not discussed here include Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), Austin Wright's *Tony and Susan* (1993), Margaret Atwood's *Moral Disorder* (2006), Gretchen Shirm's *Having Cried Wolf* (2010), Rebekah Clarkson's *Barking Dogs* (2017), Rachael Mead's *The Application of Pressure* (2020), and fragmentary novels Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* (2017) and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020).

The Contemporary Composite Novel: Definitions and Generic Debates

Critics tend to view the contemporary composite novel as having distinct and recognisable features as a form, though "generic tension" still exists (Driss 63). In 1995, Dunn and Morris proposed the term "composite novel" as an evolution from the "short story cycle", which critics such as Forrest Ingram defined in 1971 as a discrete genre accompanied by its own tradition of scholarly criticism. For Dunn and Morris, the composite novel is "a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (2). In the subsequent chapters of their volume, the authors expand on each of the organising principles: "setting", "single protagonist", "collective protagonist", "pattern", and "storytelling".

Dunn and Morris's annotated list of composite novels includes texts dating from 1820 up to 1993—their own volume being published in 1995 (159-82). However, not all critics concur with their definition; other critics and reviewers have not classed some well-known titles on Dunn and Morris's list as composite novels. Suzanne Ferguson considers the term both "capacious and relatively vague" (7), and Robert Luscher argues that it is "inappropriate" in that it could encompass composites co-authored by several writers (359). Lundén questions the use of the term "composite" novel, "since all novels in a sense are composite" (13).

In 2018 D'Hoker proposed a tighter definition distinguishing the composite novel from the short story cycle. She observes that unlike the term "short story cycle", the term "composite novel" is not commonly used in scholarly literature, though she considers it critically useful, arguing it might serve to settle some of the discomfort felt by critics and reviewers (27). Texts marketed as 'novels' but which are highly fragmented, she says, wear the label "uneasily" (17). Reviewers also express "frustration" at novels that do not appear to conform to their traditional

conceptualisation of a novel—by lacking in a strong plot, for example (18). D'Hoker discusses differences and commonalities between the short story and the composite novel forms, with reference to several contemporary examples. She places the composite novel along a continuum of "fragmentation" whereby collections of unrelated short stories are at one pole, and texts that lean towards unity at the other (17).[32] The composite novel, in her conceptualisation, might sit further towards the "single-protagonist-driven plot of the traditional novel" but past the midway point of the territory occupied by the short story cycle (17). D'Hoker argues that to distinguish the composite novel from other closely related forms is useful critically for two reasons: firstly, because it cues reader expectation—and perhaps dispels the "frustration" of critics—and secondly, because it reveals the evolution of a literary form. In her view "composite novel" is still more precise than the multiple classifications and descriptors that have been assigned to novels of similar form and structure (17). She defines the composite novel as:

> a work of fiction that consists of several distinct narrative texts, storylines, and protagonists, which are integrated by means of cross-references, thematic concerns, a common plotline or a shared story-world...characterized by a dynamic tension between the whole and its parts, which results in an open text that demands an active participation of the reader in constructing aesthetic and narrative coherence. (28)[33]

D'Hoker also makes the point—as does Lundén—that the term 'composite novel' can be applied to literary works with characteristics of both the short story cycle and the novel, and she argues to keep these latter classifications distinct, so that each might retain specificity as separate

[32] Ingram also suggested a "spectrum" in relation to short story cycles. He situates unconnected short story collections at one pole and at the other, a novel (14). Similarly, Robert Luscher writes of the short story cycle: "It occupies a significant portion of the territory on the continuum one might draw between the traditional novel and the miscellaneous short story collection (358).

[33] Ferguson (3) points out that Dunn and Morris include nonfiction autobiographies—such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (1942)—in their annotated bibliography of selected composite novels (170). D'Hoker's definition specifically references works of fiction.

genres (27). Judith Leibowitz provides a helpful distinction between these latter classifications, emphasising the novel's task of "elaboration", whereas the short story's is "limitation" (12). The combination of both these elements in the same text offers a unique affordance for the reader.

I have found D'Hoker's and Leibowitz's distinctions to be useful both creatively and critically. For the creative component of this thesis, I sought to develop a work that would be both elaborated and limited, more unified than the short story collection and the cycle, yet with the fragmentation, indeterminacy and openness consistent with the discontinuous form of the composite novel. *The Essential Workers* includes a recurring character, Edwina, whose voice is interspersed between autonomous short stories; thus it leans more towards *novel* than *short story cycle*. Over the course of part two ('Winter Semester'), Edwina's narrative grows in prominence, overlapping and eventually merging with some of the essential-worker stories, in a more novelistic conclusion or 'ending'[34]

Dunn and Morris's definition was a useful starting point in terms of highlighting illustrative texts and characteristic features, but I have appreciated D'Hoker's precision in my analysis of *Murmurations* and in generating ideas for my own artefact. The texts I studied are all composed of distinct or separate stories that together function as a 'whole' rather than as collections of short stories. Louisa Thomas describes *Olive Kitteridge* as "combining the sustained, messy investigation of the novel with the flashing insight of the short story" (13). In planning a novel composed of short stories, I strove to capture something of this dual effect.

[34] In part one ('Autumn Semester'), the essential-worker stories are delineated as autonomous and independent, while in part two ('Winter Semester'), the weighting is in favour of Edwina's narrative, as she connects with the other characters and the narratives fuse. In an anticipated revised version for publication unconstrained by the word limits of the thesis, I could reconsider these relative weightings. I might expand on essential-worker sections, including either new characters or new episodes featuring existing characters, to introduce additional perspectives other than Edwina's in the later sections of part two.

The Short Story Cycle

As noted above, critical attention to the short story cycle preceded that to the composite novel, beginning with Ingram's *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (1971). Ingram was concerned that the cycle was being ignored in critical debate since it was not classified as a distinct genre. Critics comment on the growth of the form in the latter part of the twentieth century: Kennedy claims the story sequence "has quietly gained prominence among twentieth-century literary forms" (xi), and Luscher argues "in the last half of the twentieth century the short story cycle has become a conscious choice for a variety of aesthetic and thematic purposes" (368).

Ingram defines the short story cycle as "a book of stories so linked to one another by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19). Two decades later, Susan Garland Mann proposed a concise definition of the short story cycle in her *Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, focusing on the "self-sufficiency" yet interconnectedness of the independent stories; that they "work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story" (15). Luscher's definition, formulated in 2012, resembles Ingram's from 1971. He describes the form as: "A volume of short fiction, collected and organized into an aesthetic whole by its author, so that the reader successively realizes an underlying coherence and thematic unity through continually modified perceptions of pattern and theme" (358). Note that the reader and the idea of the "aesthetic whole" are considered important in both Ingram's and Luscher's definitions. I return to these ideas later in the chapter.

The features that are common to both short story cycle and composite novel are the independence of parts, the interconnection ("linking") and the idea that the stories combine to create this "whole". Yet the forms differ. Dunn and Morris see the composite novel and short story cycle as "diametrically opposed"; the former focuses attention on the "whole" while the

latter emphasises the integrity of the parts (5). In my own research, I have found that the same text can be (and has been) considered under different appellations. One such example is the classification of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). Reviewer Ruth Franklin questions whether *Goon Squad* is "a novel in new form" or "a collection of linked stories"; Luscher (370) and Valerie O'Riordan (195) designate it a "short story cycle" and Nader Helmy a "composite novel" (33). Sarah Churchwell describes it as "neither a novel nor a short story collection but something in between". The fraught categorisation of *Goon Squad* highlights the brambles of generic distinction between short story cycles and composite novels, or between the multitude of labels, which have also been the subject of scholarly debate over the last five decades. The question becomes: does it matter? In short, I think it does, for the reasons I discuss below.

The Composite Novel and Its "Rivals"

As D'Hoker has suggested, many "rival" labels have been found to describe the "collection of interlinked stories" that she distinguishes as the composite novel (29).[35] As mentioned, the term "short story cycle" is endorsed by critics Mann, Luscher, and Driss, as well as Gerald Lynch and James Nagel. Kennedy prefers "short story sequence" and points to the unfolding and cumulative effects of the sequence for the reader, without the circularity connoted by the word "cycle". Lundén favours the formulation "short story composite", regarding it as "a genre still dwelling in the shadow of the novel" (8), and proposes four subgenres: cycle, sequence, cluster, and novella (9). Sandra Zagarell and Roxanne Harde prefer the "narrative of community", though this latter category has other distinctions, as I discuss below. Margot Kelley endorses the "novel-in-stories", along with contemporary literary reviewers (Thomas). Other "rival" terms for

[35] Lundén also provides the following list: "story-novel", "storied novel", "fragmentary novel", "episodic novel", "anthology novel", "collective novel", "para-novel", "rovelle" (12-13), and Dunn and Morris supply "multi-faceted novel" and "hybrid novel" (4).

composite novels include "network" and "multi-voiced" or "postmodern" novel, but each of these, according to D'Hoker, lacks the specificity of the "composite novel" label (26). For example, D'Hoker is against the use of "postmodern novel" for the composite novel, since the term does not acknowledge "the significant literary developments that have taken place since postmodernism" (27). Driss makes the point that the proliferation of terms is at the point where such works might well be described as "nomadic" (59); and critics such as Ferguson question whether generic distinction between them is useful at all (8). As Driss points out, works located at the "crossroads" of genres are characterised by a "hybridity" that "creates a generic tension" (63), which partly explains the energetic critical debate of the last few decades. These differing positions highlight a vexed area at risk of becoming overly complicated.[36] As Kelley has observed, new genres are always appearing (301-302). She suggests this is a response to the socio-cultural preoccupations of the time, when readers are ready for forms that deviate from the formal conventions of, in this case, the "single-protagonist-driven-plot novel" (D'Hoker 17). Lundén observes that from the beginning of the twentieth century, narrative fiction had already been evolving towards "open-endedness, multiplicity and polyphony" when composite forms began to re-emerge (97). Strict genre designation risks—or may risk—the potentially restrictive consequences of any labelling or categorisation process. To assign the label "novel" creates normative expectations of the genre, aligning it with criteria identified by literary critics such as Frank Kermode— for example, unity of action, linear narration, closure, and "causality and concordance" (140).[37] Critics who favour precise generic distinction argue that if the form—in this case the short story cycle, though the argument is also applicable to the composite novel—is not defined as a genre, it risks being ignored or "unjustly neglected" in

[36] Kennedy comments that the form "resists precise definition" (vii). Luscher acknowledges the difficulties of establishing a common vocabulary and warns of "unnecessarily overcomplicating the endeavour" (359).
[37] Kermode's full quotation is: "As soon as it speaks, begins to be a novel, it imposes causality and concordance, development, character, a past which matters and a future within certain broad limits determined by the project of the author rather than that of the characters. They have their choices, but the novel has its end" (140).

literary criticism (Ingram 203). Kennedy notes, too, the "inexplicable" critical neglect of the form (xi). Lundén complains that composite forms have been "refused critical acknowledgement" (8), leading critics to misinterpret them (Ingram 203), or dismiss certain composite texts as "failed novels" (Nagel 9). Ferguson argues that this is why we should "care" about genre (3), as she argues:

> The only reason for caring about whether a particular group of stories is a sequence or cycle is the same reason as for caring what genre anything is: so that the reader can bring to bear appropriate strategies for understanding the work, for 'getting the most out of it'. (3)

For the reader, too, an understanding of genre creates expectations which influence their construction of meaning. D'Hoker confirms that "generic conventions and traditions form a blueprint for writers to use, emulate, transform, or reject, while they also shape readerly expectations and influence the understanding and evaluation of a literary text" (17). She upholds the argument that genre should not be limiting but instead generative for both writers and readers, affording them opportunities to both endorse and challenge convention. In his preface to Dunn and Morris's volume, Ron Gottesman makes the point that genre offers "provocative ways to study both the continuities and adaptability of literature as a familiar and inexhaustible source of human imagination" (vii-viii).

This is the spirit in which I have developed my creative artefact, through an interaction of my own ideas stimulated by the aforementioned literary conversation about genre and form. As the work developed, I was influenced by ideas about readers' experience of the composite novel: how readers—including myself as reader—might respond both cognitively and affectively and how they construct and value coherence in composite texts. While Dunn and Morris's definition was a starting point, D'Hoker's and Lundén's formulations, alongside the study of representative composite novels, have provided the most useful bases on which to examine

form and function and to develop my creative work. As a reader I have found composite novels to be similar to short story collections, cycles, or sequences in many respects, yet also distinct from them—as well as from novels not described as composites—with the main differentiating feature being a greater degree of *narrative* coherence in the composite novel compared to the short story cycle. I have found, along with D'Hoker (28), that the term "short story cycle" is by far the most common descriptive term, even when the examples given in relation to it are works that might also be usefully viewed as composite novels. Therefore, in this exegesis I include overlapping criticism that relates to the short story cycle and other closely related labels to describe what is, in many cases, the same critical object, whose exact position on the continuum might be difficult to pinpoint precisely.

The Composite as Narrative of Community

Many critics argue that the composite form, whether as cycle or novel, is ideal for exploring communal networks and identities, as well as themes of human connection. In his volume, Gill summarises the position of critics that the short story cycle is the "perfect literary form to express the state of their respective nation or culture" (8).[38] The 'narrative of community' model is particularly suited to this purpose; it "expands the story of human connection and continuity" (Zagarell 52). Harde defines narrative of community as a sequence or collection of episodes, text-pieces, or stories featuring the distinct voices of individuals within a community and interdependent within it (2). In her study of women's short story sequences from the nineteenth century, Zagarell proposes the narrative of community be regarded as a genre in its own right, and makes the point that narratives which portrayed community life by women writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) were—in Jewett's

[38] Kennedy argues "some story collections literally 'represent' communities; others imply by an interweaving of voices and narratives a communal consciousness" (xiv).

words—established "department[s] of literature" that pre-date Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), which are widely considered to be the first examples of the form.[39] Narrative of community focuses on representation of community in all its "everyday" aspects (499). Zagarell cites early works in this tradition from Great Britain, Ireland and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. She argues that these texts represent a "coherent response" to the Industrial Revolution and accompanying social and cultural upheaval (499). Harde takes up Zagarell's thesis, arguing that narrative of community is a useful interpretive lens through which short story sequences—particularly those written by women—can be appreciated. Jewett's *Pointed Firs* (1896) is an early example, as it comprises individual stories of community members viewed by a single narrator (1). Narrative of community texts often make use of participant/observer narrators to give voice to aspects of community life—as in *Pointed Firs*—and are usually confined to a single geographic zone. The focus is less on linear plotting and chronological sequence as on constructing community; the individual—the "self", in Zagarell's words—"exists as part of an interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit" (499).[40] I consider Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), which features several characters interconnected within a common community, to be a twentieth-century example. In both *Pointed Firs* and *Brewster Place*, the focus is less on the individual characters than on their interconnections with the community. The strong presence of Brewster Place is certainly evoked in the prologue and epilogue of this latter work, which recalls Shklovsky's observation of "framing". In *The*

[39] Zagarell prefaces her article with a quotation by Jewett from the *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, published in 1885, which entreats other writers to add to this "department of literature": books that "stir the hearts and minds of the good men and women of such a village as this …" and are written "for and from their standpoint" (498).
[40] Zagarell's argument for a discrete genre also hinges on readers' normative expectations of the form, pointing out that the response of readers and critics—in this case to the novel *Cranford* by Elizabeth Gaskell—is "to expect that such stories will be about growth or decline and to identify all serious literary narrative with the novel. Given such expectations, fictions about modes of life that are collective, continuous, and undramatic, such as Cranford, are puzzling …" she writes, because "readers either assume that the work has no story, often delegating it to the supposedly inferior category of the sketch, or impose familiar but inappropriate notions of linear plotting on it" (504-505).

Essential Workers I sought similarly to lightly interconnect the essential-worker characters, not wishing for any one of them to predominate. Also, like *Brewster Place*, I added a prologue and epilogue to the novel that feature essential-worker characters in the story-world setting of an Australian city affected by the onset of a global pandemic.

An aspect of the narrative of community—and one of its main affordances for the reader, critics argue—is that its focus may be at once on the individual stories and on the overarching setting (Mann 10). Kennedy, referring to short story sequences, describes it thus: "We see characters as discrete entities inhabiting separate fictional spheres, yet we also recognise common themes and recurrent situations yoking the narratives" (195). Pacht also affirms this dual perspective; she writes that "the short story cycle can express the plight of an individual and the fate of a community through its very structure" (1). In *The Subversive Storyteller* she argues the form was a conscious choice by authors wanting to express "culturally and politically unpopular ideas", and that this is achieved "by exploiting the cycle's inherent ability to integrate disparate narrative threads" (5).

The Semblance of Community

Kennedy discusses the short story sequence as a mechanism for exploring a "semblance of community" in which characters exist in an *absence* of community and resemble "a cast of loners and losers" (195).[41] Mann concurs: "Because cycles consist of discrete, self-sufficient stories, they are especially well suited to handle certain subjects, including the sense of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy that many twentieth-century characters experience" (11). Several of the texts considered here illuminate twenty-first-century instances of such isolation.

[41] Kennedy's volume includes analyses of well-known sequences by Hemingway, Faulkner, Welty, Updike, Erdrich, and Anderson that illustrate his conception of "semblance of community" and that contain "casts of loners and losers".

In *Olive Kitteridge*, Olive is very much an isolate within her community in Maine; other characters also experience a pervasive sense of loneliness within this community. In *Hotel World* the disparities are stark between self-assured Lise, well-heeled Penny, homeless Else, and domestic worker Sara; there is a pervasive mood of disconnection between characters. Though they meet for lunch and walks together, the characters in Cusk's *Arlington Park* also seem disconnected. Each is focused on her own private rebellions and psychological vicissitudes, reflecting both intra-personal and collective isolation. At other times, notably in the framing prologue sections in *Arlington Park* and Naylor's *Brewster Place*, the focal point is the bleakness of the overarching geographical setting or "community". The characters may live in close physical proximity, yet they are psychologically distanced or separated by the boundaries of their economic circumstances.

The form I used in developing my novel shares some commonalities with the narrative of community. I incorporated multiple characters who, as mentioned above, are loosely interconnected and interdependent—though without being aware of this—and are responding to a specific, catastrophic event that has caused significant social upheaval for the entire community. As in the above-mentioned novels, I sought to portray the characters' disconnection from each other through their tenuous interactions, and social isolation through the barriers between them, as well as their collective struggle. Through the recurring character of Edwina, I wanted to explore themes of loneliness and estrangement from family, and the corrosive impacts of social fragmentation in twenty-first-century society.

Murmurations: A Composite Novella

As discussed above, the feature common to the composite novel and short story cycle is autonomous yet interconnected component parts: "self-sufficient" but "interrelated" stories (Mann 15). Dunn and Morris refer to text-pieces that are "individually complete and

autonomous" (8) while D'Hoker uses the term *distinct* in her definition (28). In its construction of autonomous, inter-woven stories, Lefevre's *Murmurations* offers a representative example of the main features of a composite: distinct narrative texts; a common—though physically absent—protagonist; a storyline characterised by frequent cross-references and common plotlines; thematic concordance; and a shared story-world.

The novella comprises eight autonomous short stories and featuring characters whose lives interconnect across the entire text. *Murmurations* is "not set in a specific city, or country" according to the author, and its era is also indeterminate, though subtle references suggest the 1960s or 1970s.[42] At the centre of the narrative action is the story of the doctor's wife Erris Cleary, and the suspicion surrounding her unexpected death. As the promotional quotes on the back cover foreshadow, Erris's absence "haunts the pages"; she "complicates" other lives. The mystery surrounding Erris's death is introduced in the first chapter, referenced sparingly throughout, and partially resolved in the final story. The novella has a nested structure; secondary characters introduced in early stories become the protagonists in subsequent stories, so that action and character, past and present, are portrayed from multiple perspectives. The first story, "After the Island", introduces a young woman, Emily, who was raised by Catholic nuns in an island home called the *Star of Bethlehem*; she is now working in her first job as a medical receptionist at Dr Cleary's practice. While listening to the doctor's Dictaphone, Emily hears an interruption from a voice making startling accusations against Dr Cleary. Emily presumes the voice belongs to Erris Cleary, whose funeral she had attended shortly after starting the job. Emily overhears gossip surrounding Erris's alcoholism and her failing mental health from the older receptionists at Dr Cleary's practice. Unworldly and uncertain, Emily is conflicted about whether to disclose her suspicions of malfeasance by Dr Cleary. The following seven stories introduce several characters, all connected in some way to Erris. In the

[42] Lefevre notes this lack of specificity in the Acknowledgements page of *Murmurations*.

penultimate story—which chronologically occurs before the other stories—16-year-old Arthur, also from the island, is working in his first job as a gardener on the Cleary property. Erris takes an interest in his situation and discreetly gifts him one thousand pounds, enclosing the money in a letter she asks him to post to her friend, Delia Harper. It is implied that the letter will provide evidence confirming Erris's husband as a suspect in her murder. By the last story, "Paper Boats", the evidence that Emily discovers in the first story is finally destined to be presented to the police.

In *Murmurations*, the eight distinct, autonomous stories focus on the vicissitudes of eight focal characters, with subtle cross-referencing throughout the novella. "Little Buddhas Everywhere" opens with Claire Delaney waiting in a hotel lobby to meet her ex-husband about property matters. Tom has moved on to a new, younger wife and now has two young children. Claire still yearns for their old life together at their grand property, Winterbourne, and finds ways to insert herself into Tom's new life. In "Evening All Afternoon", Fiona Padwick—lonely, homesick and unhappy in her own marriage—greets a desperate Barry Darkley and his children at the door one grey afternoon. Barry's wife Annie has abruptly left him, not even telling their two sons. In "Glory Days", Lizbie recounts to a faceless psychiatrist the trauma of losing both her would-be lover Marty, who is Claire and Tom's son, and future husband Griff—the now adult son of Barry Darkley—recalling happier, youthful times when she sang with both in a trio. Lizbie turns out to be the daughter of Amanda, who appears in the final story. In "The Lives We Lost", the story of Jeanie Tarrant—whom Claire mentions in her earlier story is "rumoured to be homeless" (18)—is now recounted through Jeanie's own eyes, conveying the deception that marked her marriage and her desperation to find fulfillment through art. In "This Moment is Your Life", Delia Harper, recently remarried following an abusive marriage to Roger—who is also mentioned in the first story—reflects on the deep connection between herself and Erris. In the titular penultimate story "Murmurations", the point-of-view character is Arthur. Finally, in

"Paper Boats", Magda, who has the job of cleaning out Erris's room following her death, recounts to her friend Amanda—mother of Lizbie—how she discovered critical evidence regarding Erris's death. Written on a folded paper boat Magda found under a carpet is a message that Magda assumes is from Erris: "I was never mad" (100).

D'Hoker proposes that "brevity, unity, intensity, and a sense of closure can be said to characterise most [short] stories" (24). Each of the eight stories in *Murmurations* has its own closure exemplifying these criteria. In some, the story's ending resolves a plot point and provides a sense of narrative closure. In others, the reader is left with psychological uncertainty that is nonetheless in keeping with the character's uncertainty. Martin Scofield describes this kind of ending as an "anti-epiphany", the converse of the "clinching moment of revelation or realisation that comes at the end" (282).[43] For example, in the first story, Emily makes the only decision she can at the time about what to do with her potential evidence of foul play; in her powerless position she can only summon in her imagination the protection of her former guardians and protectors, Mother Stella Marie and Sister Lucy from the island (14). In the second story, Claire does not achieve her desired closeness with her ex-husband but unexpectedly—and to her secret delight—lands a role, a consolation of sorts, looking after Tom's daughter for the Christmas period. By the end of the third story, a reluctant Fiona has provided a minimum of practical support and care for Barry and his boys, as a barely adequate preparation for the shock to come. The ending is psychologically consistent, if achingly unresolved; there is nothing anyone can do to ease Barry's pain. In the fourth story, Lizbie's insights into her devastating loss and inability to find resolution deliver a certain emotional congruence, an affective coherence for the reader, in its very lack of resolution. The fifth story reaches a similar kind of closure: there is no salvation for Jeanie Tarrant, the woman who is

[43] Martin Scofield uses this term to describe the impact of the endings of many of Raymond Carver's short stories.

now outstaying her welcome in her cousin's home, yet she finds a moment of authentic—and hitherto unfelt—comfort and respect from a man she meets on her artistic excursions. In the sixth story, Delia Harper realises with longing her attraction to Erris which cannot be requited. In these six stories, psychological coherence predominates at the end. In the final two stories, narrative closure is also salient. In "Murmurations", Erris's genuine kindness, despite her flaws, is revealed via her gift to and hopes for Arthur: "*Fly away, Arthur. Fly far, be free*" (96). In "Paper Boats", Emily, who is recognisable in the background of Amanda's story by her rosary beads and "wounded blue" eyes (107), is waiting at the police station with her yellow envelope containing the Dictaphone evidence.

In *The Essential Workers*, I planned for each story to be distinct, with interconnections between stories and characters. I wanted some stories to close more conventionally with a sense of narrative resolution. For example, in "Chicken", Helen gains the upper hand on her exploitative employer when she surprisingly and defiantly reimburses a customer—later revealed to be the recurring character Edwina. Other stories are intentionally left open-ended and psychologically uncertain. In "Holding the Air", there is no resolution of the young doctor's dilemma about whether to return to her job.

Thematic Concerns

Theme can serve to provide overall unity in the composite, as a centripetal force that "integrates" a discontinuous text (D'Hoker 28). Thematic concerns in Lefevre's *Murmurations,* which resonate in each story, revolve around the powerlessness of women and untethered young people attempting to assert themselves within their new worlds of unequal relationships. The characters share certain commonalities; all have experienced disillusionment or abuse in their marriages. Each is connected to Erris Cleary, a woman apparently "loathed" and subjugated by her well-respected doctor husband, and possibly murdered by him (98). Erris

was a woman who had to make use of unconventional means—Arthur as a messenger, Dictaphone insertions, notes left under the carpet—to communicate her powerless position. Erris shares disempowerment with most of the other characters in the novella. Claire Delaney has no power over her ex-husband's new wife Rosanna, "whose politics and religion had not conflicted with stealing another woman's husband" (22). Fiona Padwick, homesick and lonely, has a brief separation from her husband, Dan. She expects him to miss her but ends up returning for the sake of their daughter. Annie Darkley has an epiphanic moment of liberation and leaves her family "to find herself" in India, but it ends badly: "Later, stories filtered back of a gang rape in Goa ... the need for ongoing psychiatric care" (22). Jeanie Tarrant's husband confesses one night in bed that he "hadn't been in love on their wedding day" (58). Delia Harper suffers a black eye at the hands of her husband Rob and subsequently marries a similarly belligerent if not as physically abusive man. Arthur, too, is powerless to prevent the wife of his boss Len Robsart—who organised Arthur's first job at the Cleary's—from molesting him. Erris intuitively detects this, prompting her gift to him.

Kennedy argues that the short story sequence, specifically the "segmented" fiction of separated lives, has been used to reflect the real barriers that divide people, whether these are socio-economic, religious, racial, or any other factor (213). In *Murmurations,* these barriers are between powerful men and relatively powerless women, but also between those born into apparent privilege—most of the female characters were once in positions of wealth but bound economically to their husbands—and those who were abandoned at birth: Emily, Linnie, and Arthur. Arthur is an orphan, knowing nobody other than Len Robsart on the mainland. He has lost Linnie, his first love. The isolation of these three characters is echoed in the lives around them, particularly in Erris Cleary, whose life at first glance seems so comparatively privileged. Their island was a community that gave them an early but short-lived haven. As Arthur observes: "It had been wrong to send them out one by one. They should have gone into the

world in pairs; they'd have kept each other strong" (93). Kennedy speaks of "precarious attachments" common to the short story sequence, and these are evident in *Murmurations*. Ultimately the children from the island have only their very tenuous attachments to their new employers in the adult world: Emily at Dr Cleary's surgery and Arthur at the Cleary property. In this way the characters could be considered "loners"—if not ultimately "losers". They are connected in a "semblance of community", through their birth circumstance and historic association with the island.

In my own work, *The Essential Workers* is thematically concerned with exploring the inequalities and precarities that arose as a consequence of the pandemic, particularly for people who had to report physically to work, and grapple with their conflicts of 'duty' and the isolation they experienced. My essential-worker characters risk their physical and psychological safety to go to work: the supermarket operator in precarious economic circumstances is exposed to infection and abuse in her customer service role, while the inexperienced emergency doctor breaks down under the unremitting pressures of her role. Through the fractured voices and diverse scenarios of the early days of the COVID pandemic, I wanted to explore themes of disconnection and societal fragmentation: the tenuous 'semblance of community' of essential workers, united in their vulnerability and potential 'dispensability'. As a counterbalance to the insults and disruptions of the pandemic, I sought at the same time to portray the converse of disconnection. The principles of Psychological First Aid—safety, calm, connection, self-efficacy, and hope—are embedded in the stories, in instances of courage and kindness.

Cross-Referencing

In addition to explicating the organising principles of composite novels, Dunn and Morris highlight several other features:

> A composite novel like any other coherent, readable text is a tissue of fine connectives. Thus, some or all of a composite novel's text pieces may reveal repeated images or image clusters, possibly some recurring characters, shared incidents, and/or a generally common setting; probably one or more common thematic concerns; perhaps a sustained and sustaining narrative voice. (13)

The authors acknowledge that the above features are not unique to the composite novel and are evident in "any coherent, readable text" (13). D'Hoker also notes the importance of cross-referencing for the purpose of integrating the composite novel (28). In *Murmurations*, cross-referencing is particularly salient as it drives narrative and, I argue, aesthetic coherence.

Interconnecting threads between characters also feature in other novels I have mentioned in this exegesis. For example, in one story of Cusk's *Arlington Park*, character Liz Connolly's son Owen defaces another character's white sofa with a red marker pen (71), and in a later story Christine Lanham, one of the other women, complains to day-care staff about "the issue of Owen's aggressive behaviour towards the other children" (78). By dint of the cross-references, a triangulated picture of Owen's anti-social behaviour is constructed, as are the relationships of the mothers to one another, as well as to their children. In Cronin's *Mary and O'Neil,* there is a reference in the first story to Arthur's unrequited love, Dora Auclair, which is cross-referenced in a later story, when O'Neil discovers the letter his father wrote but never sent to Dora. Similarly, in the first story in *Olive Kitteridge*, Henry's decision about how he will manage his impossible love is important background information that helps the reader to understand the relationship between Olive and Henry. In Egan's *Goon Squad*, the characters are connected by multiple cross-references throughout the novel. In Smith's *Hotel World*, too, the characters in separate sections are interconnected: for example, Elspeth appears as homeless in one story and Lise offers Elspeth a hotel bed for the night in another story. The

cross-referencing establishes a subplot and highlights the inter-connectedness of the characters despite their isolation and difference in status, which are key themes in the novel. In all these texts, the cross-referencing works to underline theme and build narrative coherence.

In *Murmurations,* "shared incidents" operate to reinforce thematic concerns by threading together seemingly unconnected incidents; they also advance and connect plotlines. Briefly mentioned references to events in the early stories are expounded more fully in later stories. Cross-references from the first story to the last ultimately elucidate, if still incompletely, the mystery of Erris's death. Analysis of a brief vignette illustrates the cross-referencing that occurs across several stories in *Murmurations*. It revolves around a secondary, but thematically no less significant, subplot. In "Little Buddhas Everywhere", both Claire and Tom reference Lizbie as the young woman, a friend of their son Marty, who had taken in their cat Sixpence following their separation, since Claire had been forced to move into a flat that would not accept pets. The cat, mentioned in passing in Claire's story, returns in "Glory Days" when Lizbie, now the narrator, recalls the distress she experienced when Claire had asked her to take in Sixpence: "No! I can't look after anything," she remembers thinking, "not even myself" (55). Lizbie recalls how Claire sheltered her when she was homeless, and accepts Sixpence partially in gratitude for this, not realising that the cat was pregnant and would give birth to a single kitten. At the time, Lizbie had been troubled; she discloses her fraught relationship with her mother—the Amanda of the final story—to her psychiatrist. Lizbie fondly recalls Winterbourne, Claire's house, as "a lighthouse, set steadfast upon a rock, impervious to storms, a fixed point in a tilting universe" (47). There Lizbie first met with Marty and his friend Griff Darkley, Lizbie's future husband. Lizbie gradually reveals that Marty died of a heroin overdose and Griff eventually took his own life following Marty's death. Lizbie was infatuated with Griff but realises (in the present) that it was a futile love; she later discovers Griff and Marty were lovers. The cat, Twopence—the single kitten from Sixpence's pregnancy—reappears at the end of the

story. Tom asks Claire to mind Penny—his young daughter with his new wife—over Christmas, along with Twopence, hypocritically declaring he will get around the pet rules for the flat. The themes of rejection across generations are subtly explored in this subplot. The deft cross-references to the cat as a metaphor for an unwanted pregnancy, abandonment, and surrender—the pretext for Claire's tears, when they were really for the far more devastating loss of her son—underline the themes that permeate *Murmurations*.

Cross-references weave through the other stories. There are mentions in the first two stories of women who "let themselves go" (5, 17). Claire speaks about encountering Jeanie Tarrant on her painting excursions, and buying one of her landscapes, then recalls overhearing "people saying that the pictures weren't much good" (19). In "The Lives we Lost", Jeanie is at a dinner party in her own house—before her marriage separation forces her to leave it—and overhears Barry Darkley muttering to Erris Cleary's husband that Jeanie's paintings "didn't cut the mustard as Art" (64). There are frequent cross-references in both Claire's and Delia's stories to a fancy-dress party where Erris appeared as Jay Gatsby and danced all night with Delia Harper. Annie Darkley's epiphanic moment is referenced by Claire, by Lizbie, and by Griff. Claire recalls the moment at a shared dinner when Annie "lurched to her feet and declared that she was no longer prepared to clean a bathroom where three men went to piss" (22). Griff, her adult son, later characterises the period of their abandonment as "after Ma got liberated" (48). Lizbie mentions the death of Barry Darkley in passing (51); Barry is first encountered as the bereft father in Fiona Padwick's story. Finally, when Arthur reluctantly discloses to Erris that he is from the island, the connection between Erris, Emily, Arthur, and Linnie is established. Emily briefly mentions Linnie, also from the island, in the first story; it turns out that Linnie jumped from the fourth floor of the building where she had worked for just a week. In the penultimate story Arthur reveals Linnie was his first love—a cherished memory stolen by Len Robsart's wife when she molests him.

In *Murmurations*, the motifs—or "image clusters", for Dunn and Morris (13)—that also reinforce theme consist primarily of birds. The way birds "soar and plunge" is likened to the lives of the characters in the novel (72). Emily has a "bird-like grace" (108), and a photo of Erris Cleary shows her eyebrows "curved like the wings of a bird" (105). The movement of the starlings in a "murmuration"—in which the motion of birds is interconnected—gives the novella its title. The reader observes Arthur watching the children from a window of his Star of Bethlehem home, noticing:

> Their boots on the cobbles ... sounded like the beating of wings; so swift were they that their separate bodies were blurred—it was a flow of bodies coming together and pulling apart, but always more of them together: a murmuration of children. (93)

Erris discloses to Arthur how, after her mother's death, her stepmother tormented her. She released all the birds her stepmother kept in an aviary: "I opened all the cages. At first the birds didn't know what to do, so I ran from cage to cage, banging on the wire netting with a stick. Suddenly the air was thick with birds. It was more beautiful than you could ever imagine" (92). Other "repeated images", such as faded or ill-fitting curtains, strike a discordant note that further mirrors themes of decay and destabilisation within relationships. The curtains in the slightly dilapidated hotel foyer in Claire's story "don't quite touch the floor" (29), and in Jeanie Tarrant's they are "a dull rust that might once have been red" but "have shrunk...so that they no longer touch the sill" (57). Delia Harper had sewn the flapper dress she wore as she danced with Erris "from old lace curtains" and the curtains are again invoked in the post-party assault by her husband. The motif of decay symbolises the deterioration in the marriages of the characters and the change in their economic circumstances once they separate from their

husbands. Decay is also evoked in other stories. Delia Harper's new architect husband Malcolm demolishes an old cottage that Delia prefers, to build an eco-friendly but ugly house in its place. There are references to gabion walls, consisting of wire frameworks that house loose stones, but whose "structure will fail when the wire fails"—and already "showing signs of wear" (76). And as noted above, the images of cats that need to be rehomed, abandoned children or children who die, and women who have a weakness for alcohol or who "let themselves go" (17) surface repeatedly, though subtly, suffusing the text with a melancholic undertone of carelessness and corrosiveness in human relationships.

These motifs are dispersed across the stories, providing understated but powerful connection to the major themes: entrapment within unequal relationships; abandonment and loss; isolation; and the rare joy of momentary but intense human connection. The plotline and chronological sequence are peripheral to the stronger thematic concerns and psychological congruence among characters. "Repeated images" lend an integrative wholeness to the work, demonstrating an intra-textuality that gives this short novella the depth of a more expansive novel. The characters' lives are rich in unstated detail that invites the reader to infer a backstory.

> In her *Writer's Diary*, Virginia Woolf wrote of her novel *Mrs Dalloway*:
>
> I should say a good deal about ... my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters. I think that gives exactly what I want: humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment. (78)

In the minimally sketched personas of the characters in *Murmurations*, through the details that only surface via oblique, subtle references sprinkled throughout the text, Lefevre conveys "humanity, humour, depth" as well as the interconnections between them.

D'Hoker speaks of the composite as affording a "fundamental interest in bringing together a variety of personalities, lives, and stories, for however brief a moment, so as to show the isolation as well as the interconnectedness of these lives in a global world" (27). This concept is evident in *Murmurations*, as well as in the characters of Sasha in *Goon Squad* or Olive in *Olive Kitteridge*. As Garland Mann has pointed out, the form of the composite allows for physical separation between characters created by the boundaries between the short stories (11). I explored this idea in the structure of *The Essential Workers*, following the model of *Murmurations*. I sought to create walls between independent characters in autonomous stories yet to bring them together in an indirect and implicit way through cross-referencing.

"Shared incidents" in *The Essential Workers* that connect character are accidents: the truck driver injures a cat and threatens to injure or kill himself on the road; the bicycle courier is hit by a van. Characters are cross-referenced in more than one story: the bicycle courier, truck driver, police officer, and cleaner all appear in different stories and in other scenes with Edwina. Underscoring themes of neglect, abandonment, and vulnerability, the "repeated images" in *The Essential Workers* include lost or injured cats and birds; flowers; a super moon and quinces. Injured animals appear in several stories: kangaroos and cats in "Roadkill" and "Floral Arrangements"; and possums in "Steady White Light". Edwina, the recurring character, is more focused on animals than human beings and it is only when she experiences the loss of her beloved dog Rex that she recognises the extent of her estrangement from her own family and isolation from the world in general. In terms of recurring images and motifs and in the absence of an omniscient narrator, I was drawn to the idea of the bystander witness of distressing and uncontrollable events. Magpies are watchful birds: observers of human action. In "Road Service", magpies are present to witness the teacher's distress and the kindness of the road mechanic. Magpies also carol at the super moon which occurs across two stories; this latter motif links the stories and is intended to symbolise a recurring and unchanging

phenomenon of the universe in a world that has seemingly been upended. Edwina's adopted stray cat Cressida, whose transience between two worlds is meant to mirror the predicament of character Joo, has her own subplot within Edwina's overarching narrative. Flowers recur in two stories, "Floral Arrangements" and "Holding the Air", intended as a symbol of silent communication in a world struggling with pandemic restrictions on celebrations and funeral services. Flowers in the hospital setting of this latter story serve as reminders that they are the only sources of comfort for the bereaved, whose grief is exacerbated by the heightened loss of life associated with that setting. The coronavirus pandemic hit Australia in autumn, in quince season. The making of quince preserves is Edwina's currency; she uses quince jelly to manipulate people around her: for example, by bartering it for special consideration at the university and, towards the end, offering a jar to the contact tracer. Some characters interconnect between stories. In other stories I set lines of space as silent barriers: for example, in "Roadkill", in the spaces around the text messaging, I wanted to emphasise the disconnection between Reddy and his wife.

The Protagonist

According to Dunn and Morris, a key "organising principle" and a "central, unifying force" of the composite novel is the presence of a protagonist, whether "single" or "collective" (15). The protagonist as structuring device is, of course, also present in other novels and therefore is not unique to the composite novel. There are a range of ways the protagonist may present in a composite novel. In some composite novels the single protagonist is a "narrator-protagonist", a central figure who develops story by story (Dunn and Morris 49). Examples include Rose in *The Beggar Maid,* Sara in *In Another Country*, and Olive in *Olive Kitteridge*. The protagonist in *Murmurations*, the shadowy Erris, is notable by her *absence*, as if 'off-stage'; she is not the

dominant character, but instead shares prominence with the other characters. Erris is an example of a "central, unifying" force, yet one who "appears and reappears sporadically" (Dunn and Morris 15). She is frequently referenced, but never the main character in any story, as the following examples show. In "After the Island", Emily overhears rumours about Erris's alcoholism; the other medical secretary gossips that "people said she'd had some kind of breakdown" (13). Claire Delaney has heard that Erris "smashed up all the mirrors in her house in a drunken rage" (18). The receptionists at Emily's workplace reveal that Erris was unable to have children, that she took on abandoned babies before adoption as a kind of emergency foster arrangement—striking a chord with Emily—and that there were "two or three cot deaths" but "nothing could be proved" (14). Further, Claire recalls an event also referenced by several other characters: Erris dressed as Jay Gatsby and dancing with Delia Harper, causing jealous outrage in their husbands. In her story, Fiona Padwick invokes Erris as a good friend who sent a postcard to let Fiona know that the group missed her when she had to forgo the group's coffee gathering (41). As mentioned, Delia Harper, too, reflects on the memorable Jay Gatsby dance scene at Claire's party but denies any sexual attraction at the time. Now in the wake of her relationships with abusive men, she regrets a missed opportunity for intimacy with the comforting figure of the now deceased Erris. In the above examples, Erris's presence is only evoked; she remains 'off-stage'. Yet through these small snatches of recollection, the portrait of a kind yet unstable woman is constructed. The contrasting facets of Erris's character are progressively revealed in subsequent stories, and the reader can infer her close relationships with the other characters. In the penultimate story, a final image of a generous and compassionate Erris is glimpsed, in a much more sympathetic light, through the eyes of young Arthur.

My idea to use a recurring character was inspired by models such as Olive in *Olive Kitteridge*, the title characters in *Mary and O'Neil* and Sara in Kenney's *In Another Country*.

In *The Essential Workers* I intended Edwina to function as a central, unifying protagonist, but who is neither physically absent like Erris in *Murmurations*, nor dominant as a narrator-protagonist. Edwina is similar but not exactly like the models above. Initially, she only fleetingly interacts with other characters—in "Chicken" and "Dumpster Zone"—and she observes and comments on the action in "Road Service". Edwina's status as a recurring character shifts in the second half of the novel when her stories start to merge with those of the essential worker characters. Edwina is perhaps most like the character Dorelia in Lefevre's recently published novel *The Tower* (2023) in that she appears and reappears, interweaving between the other characters' stories. I planned Edwina as a character who would bring the essential worker characters together. A second recurring character, Joo, is a Korean student caught in a state of limbo in Australia. Though not an essential worker, she also connects with Paul, the police officer and Joe/Ishak, the fast-food courier. Over the course of the novel, I wanted the interaction between Edwina and Joo to expose Edwina's isolation and need for human contact.

According to Pacht, the presence of a "collective protagonist" serves to distinguish the story cycle as a unique genre (118). In the composite novel, Dunn and Morris define a "collective protagonist" as either "a group that functions as a central character" or "an implied central character who functions as a metaphor" (59); Mann suggests the "archetypal Dubliner" (from *Dubliners*) as an example of the latter (30). In her volume, Pacht describes a collective protagonist as a "series of unique but ultimately similar characters that represent the fate of a generation or community of people" (89) and provides examples of narratives in which several characters have experienced the same, common struggle. Rebekah Clarkson identifies a collective protagonist in the female characters of Belle Boggs's short story cycle *Mattaponi Queen* (2010): women who collectively share the grief of infertility and loss (80). In *Murmurations*, the collective protagonist is the voice of any one of the female characters

exploited or abused by powerful men. In *The Essential Workers,* I attempted to draw a collective protagonist in the characterisation of "essential but dispensable" workers.

Murmurations can also be viewed as a multi-voiced narrative, like the narrative of community, in that characters other than Erris and their stories share prominence in a way that recalls Cusk's *Arlington Park*. Cronin's *Mary and O'Neil* provides another illustration of the reappearing protagonist, and one seen from multiple perspectives. O'Neil is the "central unifying force" of the novel, yet he is first viewed from the perspective of his parents in the opening story, and from the viewpoint of Mary, his future wife, in later stories. Other composites with a central protagonist who is not the narrator include *Hotel World*, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *The Things They Carried*, and *The Women of Brewster Place*. These novels feature multiple characters, each with their own stories, as well as a recurring character that serves to unify the work, but—to recall again Shklovsky's "threading"—whose presence is not dominant. In *Hotel World*, it is Sara and the voice of her ghost; in *Goon Squad*, Sasha opens and closes the narrative and is referenced in other stories; in *Things They Carried*, the fictional Tim O'Brien, not always the narrator, is a thread through separate stories; in *Brewster Place*, the character Mattie Michael appears in each story, though is not necessarily the focal character. In each of these novels the voices of other characters are as prominent as the focal or main character.

The Story-World

D'Hoker refers to the "story-world"—also "storyworld"—as one of the distinguishing features of a composite. The term, taken from narratology, implies more interactivity between text and reader than the terms 'fictional world' or 'narrative world'. In Erin James's analysis, story-world is used in literature and in relation to storytelling in other media such as film, gaming, or music

to describe "what happens in a narrative", "the *interactive* "world-making" process between the text and the reader" (x, emphasis added). James offers: "To understand a narrative...we must lose ourselves in the same environment and experiences as a narrative's characters" (x). The reader or viewer thus plays a part in constructing the story-world by making mental models or simulations from the text and "inhabiting those models emotionally" (x). Similarly, for Marie-Laure Ryan, the story-world is not simply a "static container" of the narrative components—that she defines as character, events, time, setting, space, and causality—but more a "dynamic model" (35-36); certain texts "project a world" for the reader or viewer, who may become immersed in this "blend of objective knowledge and make-believe", she argues (36). When Terence Cave describes the reader, or in his case listener, as "entering the story-world, or the mood of a song ..." he highlights story-world as an embodied creation, sparked by the words of the writer (58).

A story-world encompasses more, then, than the fictional geographical, historical, or socio-cultural setting, and incorporates a dimension of the reader's affective interaction and immersion, or embodiment, with that text. A clear example is the story-world of the inner-city hotel in Smith's *Hotel World*. Within this fictional but believable world, characters act and interact; they are connected in the physical space of a hotel in the geographically unnamed location, but they are also psychologically connected. This latter world I would argue is the more immersive for the reader. In Cusk's *Arlington Park*, the story-world is the web of tense interpersonal connections between characters, amplified by the suffocating smallness of their geographical locale; for the reader, the psychological story-world dominates the other narrative elements. Though the characters in Lefevre's *Murmurations* once lived in physical proximity to each other, the geographical setting is far less significant than the microcosmic story-world, an intricately woven web of psychologically and socially interconnected lives. The absence of temporal and geo-spatial markers in these composites may function to amplify the "make-

believe" world that feels oddly detached for the reader, yet at the same time draws them into its space.

The Essential Workers' story-world is an unnamed city in Australia, where the response to the pandemic differed from that of other countries in that international and state borders closed and cities entered long lockdowns; Melbourne experienced 262 days of lockdown, one of the longest in the world (Vally). The time sequence is intentionally achronological. Taking key concepts from the definition of story-world, namely the "blend of objective knowledge and make-believe" (Ryan 36), my intention was to blur time and space, to invite the reader into a partly real, partly "make-believe" pandemic story-world. The backstories of some of the characters also contain elements of story-world, as I have discussed, in that they are partly realistic and plausible yet at the same time indeterminate.

The Reader: How the Composite Novel Functions

The reader is central to definitions of short story cycles and composites. For Ingram "the short story cycle is a book of short stories so linked to each other by the author that the *reader's successive experience* on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly *modifies his experience* of each of the component parts" (19, emphasis added). Luscher defines the cycle as: "a volume of short fiction, collected and organised into an aesthetic whole by its author, so that the *reader successively realises* an underlying coherence and thematic unity through *continually modified perceptions* of pattern and theme" (358, emphasis added). For D'Hoker, the composite "demands an *active participation of the reader* in constructing aesthetic and narrative coherence" (28, emphasis added).

Reader response is at the core of these definitions, with its imperative for readers to detect patterns and make meaning in their interaction with the text.[44] Yet, as literary critics in the 1970s observed, such responses could only be theorised. Nagel points out that Ingram's definition is problematic as it "relies on the consciousness and intention for the author and in speculations about the responses of prospective readers" (11). The challenges of researching subjective reader response were well known to theorists in the 1970s. Wolfgang Iser hinted that what he termed the "anthropological side of literary criticism" was an important and as yet—in 1978— "very open field" (xi). Hans Robert Jauss referred to the "threatening pitfalls of psychology" in theorising the reader's mental processes, and which might "plague the literary experience" (11). Louise Rosenblatt, a prominent early proponent of reader-response theory, wrote in the fifth edition of her volume *Literature as Exploration*: "Both the creation and

[44] Reader-response theory, associated with literary theorists Rosenblatt, Iser, Fish, Jauss and others, developed as a response to New Criticism which was dominant in literary studies between the 1940s and the 1960s. The New Critics asserted that the static features of the text ("the text alone") were the only considerations needed to interpret it (Tyson 135). While not devaluing the importance of the text, reader-response criticism turned the focus to what readers brought to this interpretation, emphasising the active role of the reader in constructing meaning. Wolfgang Iser, for example, argued: "meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced" (10).

reception of literary works are influenced by literary tradition. Yet ultimately any literary work gains its significance from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the linguistic stimuli offered by the text" (28). The ideal would be to examine "the minds and emotions" of readers to understand whether the "particular" reader of the composite novel "differs in her interaction with the text", as Kelley has suggested (297). Yet it is difficult to explore the reader's construction of meaning, as Anja Müller Wood notes in her chapter on "Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles", without recourse to reader evaluation. Insights into reader response, she argues, require "additional information from outside of literary studies, i.e. the cognitive sciences, especially cognitive and evolutionary psychology and neuropsychology" (33). In the decades since reader-response theory emerged, many fields of enquiry into the phenomenology of the reader have proliferated, including in experimental psychology, linguistics, aesthetics, and the cognitive neurosciences, to mention a few. There are attempts to bring these disciplines together, but many challenges remain.[45] While drawing together interdisciplinary research in reader response was an initial ambition for this exegesis, it has proved to be beyond its scope. In the next section, nonetheless, I consider features of the composite as they affect the reader, informed by the thinking of Ingram, Luscher, and D'Hoker, and I conclude with some trends from outside literary studies. My questions were: Why this form? What are its affordances for the reader? How does the reader make meaning from a discontinuous form? To be clear, my 'targeted reader' is myself. The responses to the composite texts I have included in this exegesis are my own, sharpened by the insights of literary theorists. Both have informed the development of my own creative work.

[45] In 2019, Humanities and Social Science researchers from the group *Literature, Cognition and Emotions* met with the goal of understanding "The Place of the Cognitive in Literary Studies". Karin Kukkonen writes that in the two decades following the "cognitive turn" in literary studies "it would be difficult to say that cognitive approaches to literature have found "their place" within literary studies" (1).

Tensions in the Composite

A salient feature of the composite, as discussed, is its capacity to depict multiple individual perspectives at the same time as an overarching view of a specific period or era. Lynch's phrase "the one and the many" refers to this combination of 'particular' perspective as captured in the short story, against the 'whole' of the entire text ("One and the Many" 91). Lundén among other critics argues that "the tension between variety and unity, separateness and interconnectedness, openness and closure has been, if not ignored, at least given less attention than it deserves" (12). Tension, as conceptualised above, is considered to be one of the main affordances or advantages for the reader of the composite (24). Up to this point I have discussed 'centripetal' forces that drive towards unity and narrative coherence in the composite. I turn in this section to equally distinguishing features of the composite: namely, competing 'centrifugal' tensions that appear to work *against* unity, yet which deliver, I argue, an aesthetic effect for the reader. These are the elements that disturb and destabilise and drive towards "heterogeneity and diversity" (D'Hoker 27). Lundén claims that "unity, coherence, and closure have been privileged at the expense of the functions of discontinuity, fragmentation, and openness" (8). He argues for composite texts to be considered according to an aesthetic which engages the reader in "the excitement of the disintegrated, the expectation of the indeterminate, the artistic pleasure of the unfulfilled" (29).

Aesthetic coherence is frequently referred to in critical scholarship but rarely defined. Luscher speaks of the "pleasure" and "reward" achieved by the reader of the cycle despite incomplete resolution in the narrative action and a "persistent textual disunity" (358). Aesthetic unity could be considered to overlap with the concept of unity of *tone*. Literary theorists since Aristotle have debated the three "unities" of time, place, and action in literature and drama,

which Aristotle considered the three imperatives.[46] Scholars in theatre studies have described "tone" or "overall aesthetic coherence" as a "fourth unity" (D. Kennedy).

Austin Wright notes that the usual effect of the ending in literary works is to "reduce recalcitrance" (121), which he characterises as resistance to "conventional beginnings and ends" (119). In the twentieth-century short story—or at least the most significant ones, in Wright's view—he claims that endings are instead "aggravated"; the reader is presented with "a new challenge that can only be resolved by reflection after the reading" (121). Wright discusses the "sudden termination" in short stories by Joyce—he cites "Araby" from *Dubliners*—whereby the reader has developed large expectations, and the ending thus has an initial effect of "bewilderment", yet it forces the reader "to seek a unifying principle" (121). There is no narrative closure in the conventional sense of resolution, no "epiphany" (Scofield 282) or "flashing insight" (Thomas), yet the reader is provoked to reflect in a way that enhances their aesthetic appreciation of the story, even long after the last page is turned. I think particularly of the endings of Raymond Carver's stories: for example, in "Feathers" from his *Cathedral: Stories* cycle (1983). It is as if the story does not 'end', though it finishes. Carver offers few clues as to why the couple would look back fondly on a "special" evening they didn't appear to enjoy, and during which their negative judgements about their hosts and their "ugly" baby dominate the narrative (20). There is only the merest hint in the ominous "after things had changed for us" (25); and yet, the story and its lack of resolution stayed with this reader, wrestling to be explained. It was for me a satisfying aesthetic in its very lack of resolution, which is in keeping with its discordant characters and theme.

[46] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines unity of "time", of "place" and of "action" as being "dramatic principles requiring limitation". Aristotle argued that action was the only one of these unities that should be contained within the confines of a play, as "…the plot of a play, being the representation of an action, must present it as a unified whole; and its various incidents must be so arranged that if any one of them is differently placed or taken away the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted" (43).

"Particular readers" will vary, of course, in their aesthetic response to "persistent textual disunity" (Luscher 358), as well as their preferences for narrative coherence, for reduction of "recalcitrance", and for resolution and closure. Scofield's sense of "anti-epiphany" delivered aesthetic coherence for me in relation to Carver's short story, and in relation to the other novels I consider in this chapter. I would suggest that aesthetic coherence—the making of meaning in the absence of narrative unity—may be one reason the composite novel, composed as it is of stories that may or may not 'close', appeals to certain readers.

"Discontinuity, Fragmentation and Openness"

The short story cycle and the composite novel share common features of fragmentation and discontinuity. The reader must bridge the gaps between autonomous stories. According to Pacht, as the short story cycle evolved, representative texts came to rely less on "narrative frames, repeated character and common settings" and more on "repeated images, motifs and situations" (112). I understand this as movement from the more to the less concrete, where the latter features are increasingly suggestive and abstract. The reader is challenged to "identify and interpret" (4), to "uncover, search out absences and gaps and the spaces in between in order to fully understand the text" (103). Pacht comments that it is often only on the second reading when the full significance of meaning may be experienced—the word 'cycle' connotes starting again (138). This was certainly the case for me as a reader of Lefevre's *Murmurations*; on the third reading the resonances and rich intertextuality were especially salient. The idea that the reader must engage actively with the text to understand larger meanings is of course a major precept of reader-response theory. Foreshadowing Pacht, Kelley also speaks to the importance of gaps between stories "like ellipses in a text", as spaces "where the reader is especially responsible for generating significance" (304). Recall Virginia Woolf's intentional creation of "caves" behind her characters, allowing readers to make their own inferences. Open texts, in

their silences and gaps between stories or text-pieces, thus afford the reader the possibility of constructing an aesthetic coherence that is personal to them.

Audet claims that "fragmentation and discontinuity rather than assembly or collection are the organizing principles of [composite] works" (110). Pacht and Lundén argue that the very form of the composite, its inherent "disjointedness", makes it particularly suitable to communicating themes of social fragmentation, an idea I discussed above in the section on "Semblance of Community" (Lundén 20; Pacht 139).[47] Lynch, too, in describing aspects of discontinuity in Munro's *Beggar Maid* speaks of the way narrative time is manipulated "in a way that ideally marries form and function" ("No Honey" 76).

Yet the experience of a fractured, fragmented narrative may be jarring for the reader. Kennedy writes that

> there is rarely the sense—common to the novel—of a fluid social order in which personalities interact from episode to episode across time ... The sequence typically offers no transitions, no narratorial bridges connecting one story to another. Instead, breaks or intervals between narratives produce a formal cleavage and impose a textual insularity. (196)

In his analysis of *Beggar Maid*, Lynch also refers to "temporal gaps, slippages and recurrences...which are typical of the story cycle's destabilising strategies" (*No Honey* 76).

As well as temporal and narrative discontinuity, destabilising geospatial discontinuity is salient in other composite novels. In *Goon Squad* the characters inhabit diverse geographical regions ranging from San Francisco to Kenya, New York, and the California desert, and time periods from the 1970s to the 1990s, as well as an unspecified past and future. In *Hotel World* an immersive story-world predominates over a real geographical setting which may be

[47] Lundén, referencing Kafka's *Ein Hungerkűnstler*, writes: "The narrative structure of the text is as disjunct as the world of separation and lack of communication that Kafka depicts, and the voids and silences between the stories adumbrate Kafka's message of man's inability to communicate" (21-22).

"kaleidoscopic" (Churchill) or "claustrophobic" (Lynch, "No Honey" 76) for some readers. Lynch also speaks of a "sort of vertigo" that the reader experiences in response to elements of reader comprehension in *Beggar Maid* ("One and the Many" 100). In the above examples, these critics are alluding to the sensory and affective processes that the reader must engage in to construct aesthetic coherence.

The notion that *form* might "adumbrate" theme (Lundén 22) is apparent in many of the composite novels discussed here. For me, in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the fracturing of voice and viewpoint character served to mirror the shattering psychological impact of the conscripted soldier's experience of war. In this novel the fictional Tim O' Brien is a man haunted by terrible flashbacks of a Vietnamese soldier he killed, whose image in death reverberates throughout the story "The Man I Killed" as a cruel self-incrimination: "his one eye was shut and the other was a star-shaped hole" (126). The title story "The Things They Carried" is focalised through the perspective of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, a young officer who "carried letters from a girl called Martha" (1). Due to the distraction of this unrequited love, Jimmy Cross feels inordinately responsible for the death of Ted Lavender, one of the men in his brigade. Jimmy and other characters recur across the separate and distinct stories, hauntingly, over shared incidents and frequent flashbacks surrounding the tragic circumstances of the death of Lavender, whose name and circumstances of death are repeated many times. This fragmentary, fractured structure, with repeated motifs and flashbacks, sharply reflects the psychological state of the characters before and after the war in Vietnam. The emotional impact of the novel's themes is rendered even more powerful for the reader by virtue of its form.

Egan has said that "discontinuity" is "the organising principle" of *Goon Squad* (Churchill). Time as well as geo-spatial location is constantly shifting. The chronology is similarly fractured in *Things They Carried*, scaling between present and post-war periods. Most stories are set during the conflict in Vietnam, though the fourth story, "On the Rainy River",

flashes back to the time before conscription. In Munro's *Beggar Maid*, the disjointed structure of the text mirrors Rose's life. Her mother has died, and her father remarries the permanently disgruntled Flo, who is at constant loggerheads with the capricious and defiant Rose. The 10 autonomous short stories follow Rose, starting in her childhood, and leaping forward over large interstices of time. The reader must imagine Rose's childhood development, infer the kinds of schools she attended, the unsatisfactory intimate relationships she had along the way to the slightly unhappy and unfulfilled adult she became. In this novel, Lynch speaks of time "looping back on itself like a claustrophobic Möbius strip" ("No Honey" 76). The disjointed form mirrors both the characterisation and the conflict between the two protagonists. Note Lynch's use of the word "claustrophobic", a sensory term, to describe the effect on the reader. The novel's coherence in building characterisation is not narrative; I would argue it is "tonal", affective, evoking an aesthetically powerful response in the reader.

In other composite novels considered here, temporal discontinuity creates an effect of suspense and disorientation for the reader. In *Hotel World*, time feels kaleidoscopic, underscored by the section headings that refer to tenses.[48] In *Mary and O'Neil*, temporal discontinuity underscores a gradual, delayed resolution of grief. In this novel the eight autonomous stories are separated by large chronological gaps. The first story ends with the traumatic accident in which O'Neil's parents die. In the second story, "Orphans", the reader expects to hear about the aftermath of the accident, yet it jumps four years ahead. O'Neil is in a hospital with a broken leg, about to meet his sister Kay. The next chapter, "Grooms", takes place eight years later, and the following chapters average four years between them. The effect of the delayed chronology for the reader is to withhold information and restrain emotion, until

[48] These are "Past" (1); "Present Historic" (33); "Future Conditional" (79); "Perfect" (123); and "Future in the Past (183).

its final release in the last scene (242-43). *Mary and O'Neil* offers a strong example of the destabilising tension that critics describe.

In Lefevre's *Murmurations*, discontinuity manifests in a number of ways. Each chapter introduces new characters, who seemingly do not connect with those in the preceding chapters. The timeline is disrupted; the events of the novella jump back and forth, with stories from earlier in time appearing out of sequence. The reader must piece together aspects of Erris's life as it intersects, indirectly and often in passing, with the lives of other characters. Information is missing about character and events. There is not, on first reading, a sense of "causality and concordance" (Kermode 140). Yet the reader's expectations shift to allow for the possibility that the characters and events *are* connected, and that there is an overall forward-moving and integrative progression. As Kennedy suggests: "the discovery of connections ... remains the reader's function and enhances the pleasure of the text" (196); this observation was particularly applicable for this reader of *Murmurations*.

Ingram points out that the chief concern in cycles is not chronological time, but rather "psychological time ... the symbolic times of seasons, times which recur ..." (24). John Gerlach, too, writes of temporal distortion in the composite novel as being "secondary" to experience:

> ...character begins to dissolve into theme; people are not as important as the forces which move them. Time begins to become cyclical, not linear, no longer under the sway of the strong force of sequential plot and individual character, aspects that are so important to our sense of a novel. (58)

Gerlach's analysis seems particularly applicable in the above novels. Audet uses the description "cubist"—another borrowing from Modernism—to characterise the composite: "Views, character roles and stories are disjointed, fragmented, as if the text, the narrative voice and the plot had been put through a prism that decomposed their complexity" (43). The metaphor perfectly captures the structure and aesthetic effect for the reader of *Hotel World*, *Beggar*

Maid, *Things They Carried*, and *Goon Squad*. Audet would argue the distortion of time and discontinuities in voice "represent a world in which unity is lacking or inappropriate" and in which coherence is found—or "recovered"—through "repetitive movements or unexpected coincidences" (43-44). Such an observation seems particularly applicable to the setting of a war zone, but equally so in the discombobulated story-worlds of *Hotel World* and *Goon Squad*, where the characters appear to be isolated from one another, yet their relationships shift and merge, as the reader gradually uncovers surprising connections. In *The Essential Workers*, the chronology is disrupted, reflecting a part-real, part make-believe story-world—a mirror of what happened, with some distortions. For many of us, and I include myself, the chronology of pandemic events became blurred after the first few weeks of 2020, and for some of us it has become increasingly difficult to recall the details of the impact on our lives of the restrictions at the time.

In some composite novels, conversely, time may stand still; the same event may be recounted by different characters. Lefevre captures this sense of simultaneity in *Murmurations*, through repeating the same events from the viewpoint of multiple characters—notably, the Jay Gatsby dance scene. In an interview with Sanford Pinsker about her views on short fiction, Joyce Carol Oates expresses the appeal of wanting to convey 'simultaneity' in crafting a novel: "I seem to want to tell a story as if it were sheer lyric, all its components present simultaneously" (241).[49] Kennedy also speaks to the "simultaneism" that the short story sequence affords (xi).

Discontinuity also presents as abruptness and apparent lack of closure at the end of the autonomous stories—as in the example of the Carver story discussed above—or in the whole

[49] In the same interview Oates also expresses a desire to write a composite novel: "I am fascinated too with the concept of a 'novel shaped out of a sequence of closely related and intertwined 'short stories'" (qtd. in Sanford Pinsker 241).

text. Some composites move strongly to a sense of closure and narrative unity while others remain open. More firmly than in *Goon Squad* or *Hotel World*, I would suggest *Murmurations* moves towards resolution and closure by the end, as certain narrative threads draw together in the final story. It remains, still, an open text in that there are many unfinished trails. The mystery behind Erris Cleary's death is not solved by the end of the novella. There is a hint of resolution, yet still many unanswered questions. Was it murder or misadventure? The ambiguity of Erris's character and her discordant actions in the past—neglect of babies, smashed mirrors—is never quite resolved. Similarly in *Goon Squad* and *Olive Kitteridge*, loose ends are not tied up; the reader never explicitly learns whether Sasha and Rob were lovers, and Olive's husband Henry dies before she can make her peace with him. In my view, the overall aesthetic in these novels is no less satisfying. Critics Lundén and Wright would argue that these "aggravated" endings afford aesthetic satisfactions in themselves. There are no neatly resolved scenarios but instead a sense of indeterminacy and anti-epiphany, recalling again Lundén's "artistic pleasure of the unfulfilled" (29).

Kennedy argues that "the gaps or breaks between [these] stories ... reflect a pervasive sense of detachment and dissociation" (205).[50] In *The Essential Workers* I wanted to create characters united by loss or loneliness, with the intention of evoking "detachment and dissociation". Through the gaps and silences, I wanted to invite the reader to bring their own personal context and interpretation of events. Background information is intentionally omitted for characters, as I discussed in chapter one, with the aim of allowing the reader to infer a plausible and suggestive but still indeterminate scenario. In some stories, endings are meant to be open-ended and not necessarily satisfactorily resolved, as in "Steady White Light" and "Holding the Air". In "Shiny Shoes", a teacher physically assaulted by a student must balance

[50] In support of this argument, Kennedy references Raymond Carver's story sequence *Cathedral* (1983) about which he comments, "relationships unfold as fleeting encounters in lives still largely devoid of communal attachments" (205).

care and empathy with her own personal and psychological safety; the teacher is told to learn not to care, an impossible proposition for a worker committed to duty of care towards students. I also tried to capture the same event from different perspectives. A form that de-emphasised strict temporal sequence in favour of a multi-faceted view seemed the appropriate choice to record simultaneity and diversity of responses of my characters.

The Engaged Reader

Iser writes of the reading process as a "continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories" in the "game of imagination" between author and reader (111). He states:

> There are, of course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game. (108)

Citing Roman Ingarden's *Cognition*, Iser explains that if a sentence does not "connect" with the next, based on expectations aroused by its "predecessor", the resulting hiatus prompts "vivid surprise" or "vexation" for the reader, which disturbs the "flow of thought" (112). How, then, does the reader respond to the discontinuities and disruptions in the composite novel? In the case where the reader's expectation is based on their concepts of *novel* or *short story collection*, how do they manage this vexation and pursue meaning? Jauss coined the now familiar term "horizon of expectation" to refer to the process whereby a reader perceives a literary work based on expectations "the narrow horizon of his literary expectations" predetermined by genre, as well as his own subjective dispositions "within the wider horizon of his experience of life" (14). Jauss also discusses reader response to texts that demand a shift in

the horizon of expectation. According to Jauss, it requires more effort to read texts that go "against the grain" and to bring out their "truly artistic character" (15).[51] In the case of the composite novel, an anecdote serves to illustrate this point. A reader of *Murmurations* wrote that she had started reading the novella with no understanding of the form. She struggled initially with multiple, seemingly unconnected characters, having expectations of a linear plot and causal action, before understanding the form of the novella from its back-cover description. In her words, she "began to go with it", paying more attention to the links and cross-references to characters in previous stories. Once she understood that the novella was a "series of stories that intriguingly fold into each other", she was able to adjust her expectation.[52] The anecdote illustrates, firstly, the potentially jarring experience for some readers of a discontinuous text if it goes against expectation, and secondly, the importance of identifying and understanding genre. Moreover, it illuminates the process whereby readers, once they are appropriately cued, can adjust their expectations to construct meaning from a text that might go "against the grain".

Beyond Literary Studies

In this exegesis I have argued that the 'vexing' features in the composite novel may well constitute its more interesting affordances. Lundén argues: "The gaps, the vignettes, the contradictory chronology, the absence of recurring protagonists ... they are not flaws, they work either to subvert or reinforce the author's message. A larger pattern is often thereby established, one that makes room for both order and disorder" (28). Luscher, too, sees "formal recalcitrance" and "discontinuity" as "pleasures of such texts" (358). Many literary critics thus view disturbances as welcome challenges, and research outside literary studies also confirms

[51] Jauss claims many "eternal" works belong in this category, though they may not have at first been considered. He cites Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as an example (17).
[52] Debra Adelaide's testimonial on the back cover of *Murmurations*.

this position. From the cognitive sciences we have learned that encountering discrepancy or the unexpected in a text triggers an appraisal process accompanied by "increased emotion, interest and curiosity" (Silvia 58). Ratings of "strikingness"—words, phrases or events that are unpredictable, capturing attention and interest (Miall and Kuiken 392-93)—are correlated with stronger and more intense affect in readers.[53] That is, passages that are *less familiar*, characterised by novel linguistic variation, and which disrupt automatic and economical processing of language trigger stronger emotional reactions.[54] In literature, this is known as "defamiliarization"; Shklovsky's well-known definition is as follows: "in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art" (6). Shklovsky argues that if we "enstrange" the artistic object, thereby "complicating form", our perception becomes prolonged and we fully experience the process of creativity (6). In experimental psychology, Arthur Jacobs and Roel Willems also offer support for this literary precept:

> defamiliarizing text elements that make situation model building and meaning making harder, requiring schema adaptation and broader/deeper reflection, will inhibit immersive processes but increase readers' likelihood of entering a trajectory resulting in aesthetic feelings. (150)[55]

Although it is couched in an entirely different language, this statement for me represents a rare kernel of shared cross-disciplinary understanding. My interpretation of Jacobs and Willems's

---

[53] David Miall and Don Kuiken, cross-disciplinary researchers at the University of Alberta, conducted several experiments investigating how readers respond to "foregrounded" (defamiliarised) features of literature. They found readers "consistently" rated passages that were high in foregrounded features as "affectively more intense" (389).

[54] Neuroscientific studies produce contrasting but not contradictory results. Isabel Bohrn and colleagues summarise the fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) findings on aesthetic judgment of literary texts, linking literary reading with brain activation. They found while increasing novelty in a sentence produced higher processing effort in the reader, there was also strong neural activation for familiar words. They conclude that we also "like what we know" (1).

[55] Jacobs and Willems's "fiction-feeling" model proposes that texts offer a mix of 'background'—familiar words, themes, or scenes—and 'foreground' elements, which activate separate neural routes and different reading behaviours (139).

findings is thus: challenging texts take more time to process and require more effortful cognitive work, which might inhibit an immersive reading, but have the benefit of enhancing aesthetic response. Relating these findings to the composite novel, I interpret the finding as: novelty and incongruity afforded by discontinuity and other disruptive features will require longer processing time but have the benefit of prompting emotional engagement, deeper reflection, and likely aesthetic appreciation.

Relative difficulty for the targeted reader should not therefore prevent their construction of aesthetic coherence and appreciation of a more challenging form. Provided there is not too much of Iser's "overstrain", the reader is less likely to "opt out". Wright argues that "recalcitrance", when recognised as such, "throws light on what makes a good [short story] exciting" (129). Extrapolating this to the composite novel, which comprises many short stories, the same "exciting" effect might apply.

Concluding Statement

The literary features I have discussed above are not unique to the composite novel, yet I assert they are distinctive and salient in the reading experience of the composite novels considered here. Lundén claims the reader encounters something of an indeterminate literary object in the composite (82). I interpret this to mean a text that is open to multiple interpretations, distinctive in its discontinuity and its disruptive elements, and unpredictable in terms of the reader's horizon of expectation. As a reader of *Murmurations* and other composite novels considered here, I experienced something of this indeterminacy: the "excitement of the disintegrated" (Lundén 29), as well as "the pleasure of patterned closure in each story" and the "accomplishment of assembling a larger, unified whole" (Luscher 358). My reading experience aligned with the analyses of critics who argue that the reader constructs narrative coherence in

composite novels by connecting and cross-referencing characters and themes, and by immersing themselves into a story-world. At the same time, the composite novel's tensions and discontinuities promoted my engagement as a reader on a sensory, affective, and aesthetic level.

In this thesis I have sought to explore, creatively and critically, the topic of essential workers, utilising the form of the composite novel. Through my experience as a workplace psychologist, I was motivated to write stories featuring a series of characters defined as essential workers at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in Australia. I wished to expose the conflicts that emerged in the enactment of their professional duties and the impact these had on aspects of their personal lives. I believed the composite novel was a suitable form, given its capacity to represent diverse voices and to describe an overarching setting or story-world, which, in the case of *The Essential Workers,* is a contemporary period of significant social upheaval in Australia. I recall Gerald Lynch, who, in writing about Alice Munro's construction of narrative and character in the story cycle *The Beggar Maid,* argues that these elements are realised "in a way that ideally marries form and function" ("No Honey" 76). In this thesis my aim has been to render the destabilisation experienced by my characters through both their narratives and the fragmented form of the composite novel. I have endeavoured to engage with critical ideas about form in this exegesis, and how different features might function to influence reader experience. In turn these ideas have informed the development of my creative artefact, *The Essential Workers*.

Works Cited

Amin, Mridula. "The Workers Risking Their Lives to Keep Sydney Running During a COVID crisis." *ABC News*, 1 Aug. 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-01/the-essential-workers-keeping-sydney-safe-during-covid-19/100339140. Accessed 20 Apr. 2022.

Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesberg, Ohio*. 1919. Signet Classics, Penguin Group, 2005.

"Anxious, Overwhelmed, Abused: What It's Really Like Working in Retail During the Pandemic." *The Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2021, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/15/anxious-overwhelmed-abused-what-its-really-like-working-in-retail-during-the-pandemic. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

Aristotle. *On the Art of Poetry. In Classical Literary Criticism. Aristotle/Horace/Longinus,* translated with an introduction by T. S. Dorsch. Penguin, 1965.

Atwood, Margaret. *Moral Disorder: Stories.* Nan A. Talese, 2006.

Audet, René. "To Relate, to Read, to Separate. A Poetics of the Collection and a Poetics of Diffraction." *Interférences Littéraires/Literaire Interferenties*, vol. 12, Feb. 2014, pp. 33-45.

Australian Government, Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement. "Chapter 5: Pressures on Police and the Community." *COVID-19, Criminal Activity and Law Enforecement*, June 2021, tinyurl.com/5p2dusvm. Accessed 19 Jan. 2024.

Australian Government, Senate Education and Employment and References Committee. *The National Trend of School Refusal and Related Matters*, 10 Aug. 2023,

apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-08/apo-nid323847.pdf. Accessed 19 Jan. 2024.

Australian Red Cross and Australian Psychological Society. *Psychological First Aid: Supporting People Affected by Disaster in Australia,* 3rd ed., 2020. Pamphlet.

Bakhtin, M. M., and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bass, Judith, et al. "The Effectiveness of Psychological First Aid as a Disaster Intervention Tool: Research Analysis of Peer-Reviewed Literature from 1990-2010." *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness,* vol. 6, no. 3., 2012, pp. 247-52.

Begley, Patrick. "Food Delivery Driver's Death Wasn't Recognised by Uber and His Family Are Still Fighting for the Insurance." *ABC News,* 25 Jun. 2021. www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-25/background-briefing-uber-eats-delivery-drivers-death/100239920. Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

Berthold, S. Megan, et al. "The HTQ-5: Revision of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire for Measuring Torture, Trauma and DSM-5 PTSD Symptoms in Refugee Populations." *European Journal of Public Health* Vol. 29, no. 3, 2018, pp 468-74.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron.* c. 1348-53. Translated by G. H. McWillliam, The Franklin Library, 1981.

Bogle, Ariel. "Gig Economy Workers Fear Livelihoods, Customers at Risk During Coronavirus Outbreak." *ABC News*, 6 Mar. 2020, www.abc.net.au/news/science/2020-03-06/gig-economy-workers-uber-deliveroo-ola-coronavirus-outbreak/12022072. Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

Bohrn, Isabel, et. al. "When We Like What We Know—A Parametric fMRI Analysis of Beauty and Familiarity." *Brain and Language,* vol. 124, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-8.

Booker, Chloe. "Waste Collection Could 'Grind to a Halt' as COVID Staff Shortages Force Delays." *The Age*, 12 Jan. 2022, www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/waste-collection-could-grind-to-a-halt-as-covid-staff-shortages-force-delays-20220112-p59nlp.html. Accessed 11 Apr. 2024.

Booth, William, et al. "Boris Johnson Praises Immigrant Nurses Who Saved His Life, as Britain's NHS Becomes a Rallying Cry: The Public Health Service Has Emerged as the Most Trusted and Vital of Institutions." *The Washington Post,* 13 Apr. 2020. www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/boris-johnson-nurses-nhs/2020/04/13/51498d34-7bfa-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html. Accessed 13 Feb 2022.

"By Tuesday I'm Sitting on $31.08: A Week in the Life of a Melbourne Food Delivery Worker." *The Guardian,* 1 Nov. 2020, www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/01/by-tuesday-im-sitting-on-3108-a-week-in-the-life-of-a-melbourne-food-delivery-worker. Accessed 10 Jan. 2022.

Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral: Stories*. Knopf, 1983.

Cassidy, Tara, et al. "Truck drivers Lose Pay Waiting Days for COVID Tests Due to Cross-Border Rule Changes." *ABC News*, 30 Jul. 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-31/trucks-freight-drivers-lose-pay-over-covid-border-testing/100339598. Accessed 3 May 2022.

Castle, Gregory. *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. Blackwell Publishers, 2009.

Cave, Terence. *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Churchwell, Sarah. "A Visit from the Goon Squad – Review." *The Guardian*, 13 Mar. 2011. www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/13/jennifer-egan-visit-goon-squad?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other. Accessed 1 Jul. 2022.

Clarkson, Rebekah. *5251: The Short Story Cycle and the Representation of a Named Place*. 2015. University of Adelaide, PhD dissertation.

---. *Barking Dogs*. Affirm Press, 2017.

Cox, Catriona. "'Healthcare Heroes': Problems with Media Focus on Heroism from Healthcare Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 46, 2020, pp. 510–13.

Cronin, Justin. *Mary and O'Neil*. Bloomsbury, 2002.

Cunningham, Sophie. *Fire Flood Plague: Australian Writers Respond to 2020*. Vintage, 2020.

Cusk, Rachel. *Arlington Park*. Faber and Faber, 2006.

Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. 1722. Lerner Publishing Group, 2020.

D'Hoker, Elke. "A Continuum of Fragmentation: Distinguishing the Short Story Cycle from the Composite Novel." *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*, edited by Patrick Gill and Florian Kläger, Routledge, 2018, pp. 17-30.

Driss, Hager Ben. "Nomadic Genres: The Case of the Short Story Cycle." *Mosaic*. vol. 51, no. 2, 2018, pp. 59-74.

Dunn, Maggie, and Ann R. Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. Studies in Literary Themes and Genres, no. 6. Twayne Publishers, 1995.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

"Essential Worker: Meaning and Use." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/dictionary/essential-worker_n?tab=meaning_and_use&tl=true. Accessed 24 Apr 2024.

Ferguson, Suzanne. "Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels: The Short Story in Genre Criticism." *Journal of the Short Story in English,* vol. 41, Autumn 2003, pp. 103-117. Online edition, 30 Jul. 2008, pars. 1-23, journals.openedition.org/jsse/312.

Forget Me Not. Directed by Sun Hee Engelstoft. Produced by Monica Hellström, 2019. Accessed SBS on Demand, 17 Dec. 2021.

Franklin, Ruth. "The Read: Books I Missed." *The New Republic*, 1 Dec. 2010. www.newrepublic.com/article/79517/the-read-missed-books-reviews. Accessed 27 Apr. 2023.

"Frontline Worker." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/search/advanced/Meanings?textTermText0=frontline+worker&textTermOpt0=Definition. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.

Gaitens, Joanna, et al. "COVID-19 and Essential Workers: A Narrative Review of Health Outcomes and Moral Injury." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* vol. 18, no. 4, 2021, article 1446, doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041446.

Gerlach, John. "Faulkner's Unvanquished and Welty's Golden Apples: The Boundaries of Story, Cycle, and Novel." *Short Story,* vol. 2, no. 2, 1992, pp. 51-62.

Gill, Patrick. "Introduction." *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*, edited by Patrick Gill and Florian Kläger, Routledge, 2018, pp. 1-14.

Gregory, Karen. "'My Life Is More Valuable than This': Understanding Risk among On-Demand Food Couriers in Edinburgh." *Work, Employment and Society,* vol. 35, no. 2, 2021, pp. 316-31, doi.org/10.1177/0950017020969593.

Harde, Roxanne. *Narratives of Community: Women's Short Story Sequences*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

Hassan, Vally. "262 Days in Lockdown." *The Conversation*, 17 Dec. 2021, www.theconversation.com/covid-in-victoria-262-days-in-lockdown-3-stunning-successes-and-4-avoidable-failures-172408. Accessed 22 Apr 2024.

Helmy, Nader Mostafa. "Towards Mosaic Wholeness: Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad as a Composite Novel." *CDELT Occasional Papers in the Development of English Education,* vol. 63, no. 2, 2017, pp. 33-54.

Hunter, Roseanna, et al. "The Workplace and Psychosocial Experiences of Australian Junior Doctors During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Internal Medicine Journal* vol. 52, no. 5, 2022, pp. 745-54.

Ingold, Tim. "Ways of Mind-Walking: Reading, Writing, Painting." *Visual Studies,* vol. 25, no. 1, 2010, pp. 15-23.

Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*. Mouton, 1971.

International Labor Organization [ILO]. "Chapter V: Substantive Provisions of Labour Legislation: The Right to Strike: Essential Services and Emergency Situations." *Labour*

Legislation Guidelines, webapps.ilo.org/static/english/dialogue/ifpdial/llg/noframes/ch5.htm - 6. Accessed 6 May 2024.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

Jabr, Ferris. "Why Walking Helps Us Think." *The New Yorker*, 3, 2014. https://teaching.ellenmueller.com/walking/files/2020/03/Why-Walking-Helps-Us-Think-_-The-New-Yorker.pdf. Accessed 6 Feb. 2021.

Jacobs, Arthur M., and Roel M. Willems. "The Fictive Brain: Neurocognitive Correlates of Engagement in Literature." *Review of General Psychology,* vol. 22, no. 2, 2018, pp. 147-60.

Jacobs, Arthur. "The Scientific Study of Literary Experience: Sampling the State of the Art." *Scientific Study of Literature,* vol. 5, no. 2, 2015, pp. 139-70.

James, Erin. *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*. Frontiers of Narrative. University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

Jauss, Hans Robert, and Elizabeth Benzinger. "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory." *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1970, pp. 7-37.

Jewett, Sarah Orne, and Mary Wilkins Freeman. *Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman*: *Including The Country of the Pointed Firs.* 1896. Edited by Barbara H. Solomon, The New American Library, 1979.

Jiskrova, Gabriela Ksinan. "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Workforce: From Psychological Distress to the Great Resignation." *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health,* vol. 76, no. 6, 2022, pp. 525-26.

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Offers New Online Course for Public Health Program Managers and Developers on Maximizing Effectiveness of COVID-19 Contact Tracing." Media release, 27 Jul. 2020, publichealth.jhu.edu/2020/johns-hopkins-bloomberg-school-of-public-health-offers-new-online-course-for-public-health-program-managers-and-developers-on-maximizing-effectiveness-of-covid-19-contact-tracing. Accessed 4 Mar 2021.

Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. 1914. Jonathan Cape, 1964.

Karp, Jann. *Truckies: Life Behind the Wheel.* WBook, 2012.

Kelley, Margot. "Gender and Genre: The Case of the Novel-in-Stories." *American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Julie Brown. 1995. Routledge, 2014, pp. 295-310.

Kennedy, Dennis, editor. "Unities." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*. 2003. Online edition, Oxford University Press, 2005, tinyurl.com/3xw8a7c7. Accessed 30 Aug. 2024.

Kennedy, J. Gerald. *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Kenney, Susan. *In Another Country: A Novel*. Viking, 1984.

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction.* Oxford University Press, 1966.

Khan, Nibir. "The Financial Pressure and Mental Toll Migrants Face Supporting Loved Ones Abroad during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *ABC News,* 11 Jan. 2022, www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-11/qld-coronavirus-covid19-migrant-refugees-financial-pressure/100688142. Accessed 20 Jan 2022.

Khan, Zahra, et al. "Military Metaphors and Pandemic Propaganda: Unmasking the Betrayal of 'Healthcare Heroes.'" *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol 47, 2021, pp. 643-44.

Korean Adoptees in Australia Network. "History of Korean Adoption." www.kaian.org.au/history-of-korean-adoption. Accessed 12 Jun. 2024.

"Korean Transnational Adoption to Australia: 'Quiet' Migrants, Diaspora, and Home Tactics." melbourneasiareview.edu.au/korean-transnational-adoption-to-australia-quiet-migrants-diaspora-and-hometactics/. Accessed 12 Jun. 2024.

Krauth, Nigel. "The Domains of the Writing Process." *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*, edited by Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady, Post Pressed, 2006, pp. 187-196.

Kukkonen, Karin, et al. "The Place of the Cognitive in Literary Studies." *Cogent Arts & Humanities,* vol. 6. no. 1, 2019, article 1691841. doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2019.1691841.

Latham, Monica. "Variations on 'Mrs. Dalloway': Rachel Cusk's 'Arlington Park.'" *Woolf Studies Annual, 2013,* vol. 19, pp. 195–213.

Law Council of Australia and Australian Medical Association. COVID-19: Essential Services and Workers Factsheet. www.ama.com.au/sites/default/files/LCA_and_AMA_Essential_Services_Factsheet.pdf Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

Lefevre, Carol. *Murmurations*. Spinifex Press, 2020.

---. "Spotlight on Carol Lefevre." Australian Short Story Festival, 7 Nov. 2021, Hawke Centre, University of South Australia, Adelaide.

---. *The Tower*. Spinifex Press, 2022.

Leibowitz, Judith. *Narrative Purpose in the Novella*. 1974. Vol. 10 of De Proprietatibus Litterarum. Series Minor, edited by Cornelis H. van Schooneveld, De Gruyter, 2013.

Levenson, Michael. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Levina, Marina. "Covid and Essential Workers: Medical Crises and the Rhetorical Strategies of Disposability." *COVID and...: How to Do Rhetoric in a Pandemic*, edited by Emily Winderman, et al., Michigan State University Press, 2023, pp. 79-96. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.14321/jj.7794620.9.

Lloyd, Mary, et al. "Australia's COVID-19 Delta Outbreak Is Pushing Frontline Hospital Staff to the Brink." *ABC News,* 6 Sep. 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-06/covid-hospital-health-care-workers-stress/100423832. Accessed 13 Feb 2022.

Lundén, Rolf. *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite*. Rodopi, 1999.

Luscher, Robert M. "The American Short-Story Cycle: Out from the Novel's Shadow." *A Companion to the American Novel*, edited by Alfred Bendixen. Blackwell Publishing, 2012, pp. 357-72.

Lynch, Gerald. "No Honey, I'm Home: Place over Love in Alice Munro's Short Story Cycle, 'Who Do You Think You Are?'" *Canadian Literature*, vol. 160, 1999, pp. 73-98.

---. "The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 130, Autumn 1991, pp. 91-104.

Lyons, Malcolm, and Ursula Lyons, translators. *Three Tales from the Arabian Nights*, with an introduction by Robert Irwin, Penguin, 2008.

Mann, Susan Garland. *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*. Greenwood Press, 1989.

Mazerolle, Lorraine, and Janet Ransley. "Policing Health Regulations in Democratic Societies: A Focus on COVID-19 Challenges and Opportunities in Australia." *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice,* vol. 45, no. 3, 2021, pp. 315-27.

McCarthy, Marty. "Intensive Care Units Working Tirelessly, Learning From Experience, Applying New Treatments in the Battle against COVID-19." *ABC News*, 20 Jul. 2020, www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-20/intensive-care-units-icu-coronavirus-covid19-victoria/12467050. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

McGowan, Michael, and Ben Smee. "Man on Bench Eating Kebab among 50 People Fined in NSW and Victoria for Violating Coronavirus Laws." *The Guardian*, 3 Apr. 2020, www.theguardian.com/law/2020/apr/03/man-eating-kebab-on-bench-among-50-people-fined-in-sw-and-victoria-for-violating-coronavirus-laws. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

Mead, Rachael. *The Application of Pressure*. Affirm Press, 2020.

Miall, David, and Don Kuiken. "Foregrounding, Defamiliarization, and Affect: Response to Literary Stories." *Poetics*, vol. 22, no. 5, 1994, pp. 389-407.

Müller-Wood, Anja. "Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles." *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle,* edited by Patrick Gill and Florian Kläger, Routledge, 2018, pp. 32-44.

Munro, Alice. *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*. Allen Lane, 1980.

Nagel, James. *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*. Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

National Heavy Haulage. "Aussie Slang and Truckie Talk Explained." 18 Jun. 2018, www.nationalheavyhaulage.com.au/aussie-slang-and-truckie-talk-explained/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2020.

Naylor, Gloria. *The Women of Brewster Place*. Viking Press, 1982.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Collins, 1990.

O'Riordan, Valerie. "Traumatic Cycles: Ali Smith and A.L. Kennedy." *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle,* edited by Patrick Gill and Florian Kläger, Routledge, 2018, pp.181-99.

Offill, Jenny. *Weather*. Granta Books, 2020.

Om, Jason. "The ICU 'Angels' Caring for COVID-19 patients in Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital." *ABC News,* 20 Sep. 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-06/covid-hospital-health-care-workers-stress/100423832 . Accessed 13 Feb. 2022.

Oppezzo, Marily, and Daniel L. Schwartz. "Give Your Ideas Some Legs: The Positive Effect of Walking on Creative Thinking." *Journal of Experimental Psychology. Learning, Memory, and Cognition,* vol. 40, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1142-52.

Overall, Sonia. "Walking against the Current: Generating Creative Responses to Place." *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice,* vol 8, no.1, 2015, pp.11-28.

Overall, Sonia. *Walk Write (Repeat).* Triarchy Press, 2021.

Pacht, Michelle. *The Subversive Storyteller: The Short Story Cycle and the Politics of Identity in America.* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

Pinsker, Sanford. "Speaking About Short Fiction: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates." *Studies in Short Fiction,* vol. 18, no. 3, 1981, p. 239-43.

"Presenteeism." *Oxford English Dictionary.* Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=presenteeism&tl=true. Accessed 26 Jun. 2024.

"Psychogeography." *Oxford English Dictionary.* Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/dictionary/psychogeography_n?tab=meaning_and_use#13051324. Accessed 30 Jul. 2024.

Quigley, Ashley, et al. "Estimating the Burden of COVID-19 on the Australian Healthcare Workers and Health System during the First Six Months of the Pandemic." *International Journal of Nursing Studies,* vol. 114, 2021, article 103811, doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2020.103811.

Rosenblatt, Louise. *Literature as Exploration.* 5th ed., The Modern Language Association, 1995.

Rossell, Susan, et al. "An Overview of Current Mental Health in the General Population of Australia During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results from the COLLATE Project." *Psychiatry Research,* vol. 296, February 2021, article 113660, doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113660.

Ryan, Marie-Laure and Jan-Noël Thon. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Frontiers of Narrative, UNP, 2014.

Schirm, Gretchen. *Having Cried Wolf.* Affirm Press, 2010.

School of Political and Social Sciences, University of Sydney. "Emotion Inequality in Pandemic Australia." Webinar, 8 Sep. 2021, soundcloud.com/user-922167185/emotion-inequality-ssw21. Accessed 15 Sep. 2021.

Scofield, Martin. *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Seppala, Emma. *The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success.* Piatkus, 2016.

Shklovsky, Viktor. *Theory of Prose*. 1925. Translated by Benjamin Sher, Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

Smith, Ali. *Hotel World*. Hamish Hamilton, 2001.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Verso, 2001.

Stobart, Anika, and Stephen Duckett. "Australia's Response to Covid-19." *Health Economics, Policy and Law,* vol. 17, no. 1, 2022, pp. 95-106.

Strout, Elizabeth. *Olive Kitteridge*. Random House, 2008.

Taylor, Catherine. "Covid Pushes Teachers to Breaking Point as Home Schooling and Lack of Priority Vaccines Bite." *ABC News*, 23 Aug. 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-23/covid-school-home-learning-teachers-at-breaking-point/100393190. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

Terzon, Emilia, and Gareth Hutchens, "Casual Workers Again the Forgotten Face of Australia's Latest COVID Lockdowns." *ABC News*, The Business, 1 Jul. 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-01/casual-lockdowns-covid-income-data-australia/100255614. Accessed 30 Nov. 2023.

Thomas, Louisa. "The Locals: Tales Set in Maine, Linked by an Overbearing Seventh-Grade Math Teacher." *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 2008, p. 13. www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/books/review/Thomas-t.html. Accessed 29 May 2022.

Tokarczuk, Olga. *Flights.* Text Publishing, 2017. Translated by Jennifer Croft.

Topple, Michelle, et al. "Nursing Workforce Deployment and Intensive Care Unit Strain During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Victoria, Australia." *Australian Critical Care,* vol. 36, no.1, 2023, pp. 84-91.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006.

"Unity: Meaning and Use." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/unity_n?tab=meaning_and_use#16685719.

Walsh, Moira et al. "More Important than COVID-19: Temporary Visas and Compounding Vulnerabilities for Health and Well-Being from the COVID-19 Pandemic for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Australia." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2022, pp. 11-26.

Wicomb, Zoë. *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*. Virago, 1987.

Wild, Ailsa. *The Care Factor*. Hardie Grant, 2021.

Williams, Tony. "The Writer Walking the Dog: Creative Writing Practice and Everyday Life." *American, British and Canadian Studies,* vol. 20, no. 1, 2013, pp. 224-38.

Woolf, Virginia, and Leonard Woolf. *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf.* Triad, 1978.

Wright, Austin M. "Recalcitrance in the Short Story." *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, edited by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Louisiana State University Press, 1989, pp. 115-129.

Wright, Austin. *Tony and Susan.* 1993, Baskerville Publishers. Atlantic Books, 2010.

Xuecun, Murong. *Deadly Quiet City*. Hardie Grant, 2022.

Zagarell, Sandra A. "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 13, no. 3, 1988, pp. 498-527.