

Unpacking the Hero

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Above my desk there is a notice board and on it I have all sorts of mundane things like the list of school dates for next year, an email from the Society of Authors about some work I have to do and a list of the email addresses of every politician in the Federal Parliament. That's all the work stuff. For my own pleasure I have a copy of a couple of poems - Judith Wright's *Woman to Man* and *Woman to Child* and Richard Tipping's poem *Mangoes*

And I have the odd photograph taken of family or friends. And I have this postcard. It's a painting, by Artemesia Gentileschi of Judith just after she has cut off the head of Holofernese.

For those of you who don't know, Judith was a woman, an Israelite widow who lived in a town besieged by Holofernese, the general of King Nebuchadnezzar. He was starving her people who were almost ready to give up. She decked herself in her finery, went with one handmaiden to Holofernese's tent, dazzled him with her beauty for three days and three nights and on the fourth night, alone with the general she got him drunk and taking up his sword, sliced his head from his body. She returned to her town and hung the head of the general from the ramparts; the towns people surged out of their besieged city and routed the now leaderless army...

It's a great painting - far more dramatic than those painted by men that I have seen. But maybe Judith is not a good hero for a Gentile like me who lives by storytelling. A better one might be Scheherazade of the Arabian Nights. She, for those of you who don't know, was a Persian, the daughter of the Grand Vizier. The Sultan had been betrayed by his wife, cuckolded, and to wreak vengeance on womankind he chose a beautiful young woman each evening as his new wife, wed her, bedded her, and the next morning he beheaded her. The Grand Vizier was the one who had to find the succession of beautiful young girls. To save the young women, Scheherazade volunteered to be the bride but in the early hours of the morning she began to tell a story to her husband and he was so taken with her tale that when she said she was tired and wished to stop he gave her a reprieve and allowed her to continue the following day. Her stories went for a thousand and one nights and she did indeed save the women of her country.

Both of these women fulfill a criterion of heroism - they are the stars of their own stories. They also fulfill more noble criteria of courage and nobility. Each puts herself at great risk in order to save her people. There are noble ideals of self-sacrifice - accompanied in these cases by great beauty, wit and wisdom. Their actions required great courage but great courage was shown too by another woman of antiquity - or is it fable - Penelope.

You see, one of the greatest of all heroes was Odysseus - who not only distinguished himself on the battlefields of Troy - it was he who devised the plan for the wooden horse - but he then endured nineteen years attempting to return home to his wife and son. Great adventures were had on the way home, but things were happening there as well. Assuming Odysseus was dead, suitors arrived to try to win the hand of Penelope. They drank and ate their way through her stores and threatened her son Telemachus. She agreed to choose one when she had finished the shroud she was weaving for her husband; she wove all day and unraveled it at night.

She's a hero - braving the wrath of the suitors, nobly upholding the memory and the value of her husband, enduring until his return. I thought of these three women when confronted with Andrew's

request to come along today and 'unpack the hero', look instead at the heroic in ordinary lives and how that is constructed in fiction.

Each of these women used wit and guile as well as, in Judith's case, action in carrying out their heroic deed. And I was reminded of Dante's definitions of the two basic sins in Hell. *forza* and *forda*. Forza is crimes of violence and force. Forda is crimes of fraud. In Dante's inferno, hell, forda was the greater crime. You see, what you have are two great areas of human behaviour: power, strength, physicality versus wit, cleverness, mentality. And in storytelling or plot creation we find plots of the body, and plots of the mind.

The first one may see great actions heroes, physical activity and physical journeying. The second one may see a journey in the mind, a struggle with the inner self, a struggle with ideas. The three women heroes I referred to represent, I believe, forda, participants in stories of the mind. It is not a territory exclusive to women; the edges with action stories can be blurred. Much wit and guile, for example, went into the creation of that wooden horse. Maybe too that is why The Odyssey is such an enduring tale - it contains both elements - *forza* and *forda*.

It's almost embarrassing to move from these great and enduring stories to my own work - in particular the tales of Hannah in the three novels published so far about her and her family. Those heroes are created through their thoughts and deeds and through language that celebrates their courage, their sense of self-sacrifice, their beauty and nobility. How is the character of Hannah created?

She is not brave or beautiful and doesn't carry out self-sacrificing deeds. She's an ordinary little girl in an ordinary middle class family, probably in the inner West of Sydney. Her concerns are those of any similar child - influenced by family and school and friends. In fact, if you take the three novels, it would appear at first glance that Hannah epitomizes the antithesis of heroism. She is at times self-centred, foolish and ignoble.

Let's take an example from each of the novels.

In *In Skating on Sand*, the narrative is driven by Hannah's decision to learn to skate. Against the express wishes of her parents, she hides her skates in the bottom of her sleeping bag and produces them when they are safely at their campsite. Her behaviour is totally self-centred. She had been asked to do as everyone else in the family had, and restrict her possessions - she did not.

Early in *Hannah Plus One*, Hannah throws a massive temper tantrum, slicing the heads off sunflowers and parading around the backyard swiping at everything, ruining her father's painting of her new chest of drawers. She's obsessed with her imaginary friend Megan and she shelters behind her when confronted by her behaviour. When teased by one of the boys in the class she reacts violently. She's self-centred and inconsiderate.

In *Hannah and the Tomorrow Room*, Hannah's grandfather moves into the new bedroom that was to be hers. Hannah's desire to be out of the space she shares with her two sisters leads her to accept the challenge issued by her friends - just get rid of him. She proceeds through a three-stage process of different actions designed to distress her grandfather and drive him away. In this she is again self-centred, foolish and lacking in any noble ideals.

But Hannah is real. And Judith, Schehradze and Penelope are not. Even if they were once real - and I'm confident Judith at least was, their stories have been embellished and embellished over the centuries. What chance has Hannah to compete?

Hannah may lack the qualities I assigned the heroes of the past, but through the stories, there is growth and change, there are shifts in her behaviour and I believe she is redeemed. When I began writing about Hannah I said I wanted to take small children seriously. I didn't mean earnestly, I just meant that I wanted to try to see the world through Hannah's eyes - that which distressed her, or uplifted her. I wanted to write about the things that she cared about. So many of the texts for and about children of this age are slapstick comedies, farces or very slight. That isn't to knock them - there's a place for all kinds of books, but I didn't want to write them.

The other thing I didn't want to do was write fantasy. That is of course the current most popular genre for young people - and for older ones too in terms of sales. There are loads of books around that are not just cashing in on the Harry Potter phenomenon but that are continuing a long tradition of storytelling in this mode. In Australia, at the primary school age group, the most successful writer would be Emily Rodda with first the Rowen of Rin series and more recently the Deltora Quest series. Even the very name of the latter series places it firmly in its genre. These books are designed to take you away from the reality of your life. There will be characters who are larger than life, perhaps they are supernatural and they will be modeled on the great superheroes of old - the very ones, usually male, who correspond to the ones I alluded to when I spoke of plots constructed of the type *forza*. There will be deeds to be done, quests to go on, obstacles to overcome. And there will be great rewards to the victor. I don't read fantasy - it's just a personal thing. My reading taste is oriented towards social realism and has been for almost as long as I can remember. And it's what I choose to write - despite the most recent couple of picture books. (digress) And when it comes to longer fiction, it seems, I write what I would have wanted to read at that age myself. So realistic fiction it is.

And in it I explore the small journey's that make up the lives of us all. As I wrote that I thought of James Joyce's *Ulysses* - his contemporary - well almost - take on a day in the life of Leopold Bloom in Dublin. We accept that Leopold's day is like the adventuring of Ulysses on his journey back to Ithaca. Joyce takes that huge powerful drama of Ancient Greece and translates it into the everyday life of an ordinary Irishman. I'm not claiming the same for my characters.

But I am interested in *forda*, the journey in the mind. The small moments that make our decisions for us and then the consequences of that decision. I'm interested in the little battles, the child overcoming the obstacle, taking responsibility, growing in stature - or at least in wisdom along the way. In doing that, I have to invest the small and the everyday with significance. Challenges from friends and family, trouble at school, accusations are all of enormous significance when what you have experienced of the world is very little. Your battles may be very little in the grand scheme of the universe but they are your battles and they have to be dealt with. And the ordinary everyday objects around you become the images that will carry meaning in the context of your journey. A particular item of clothing, a small accomplishment, a household object, may take on a significance in the context of the story that you would never imagine outside that story.

In *In Skating on Sand*, Hannah is self centred and unthinking in taking her skates when she has been told not to. But look at it from her point of view. She wants to learn to skate. Mum and Dad admit they haven't had time to take her somewhere where she can practise and learn. They admit that there is nowhere at home to practise. Hannah has made a commitment to herself that she will teach herself to skate these holidays and she is absolutely determined. I think you can see her as true to herself. Her task is difficult - there are problems with the family, there is a disastrous moment when she and Dad end up underwater and then she confronts her fear of animals. But she is determined. (piece to read.) But in the end she is skating - she fulfills her great desire and it is obvious that her parents are the kind who are not going to wreck a family holiday over an issue such as this one. In fact their conversation in the final stages of the novel suggests that they respect her success and are very proud of her.

In *Hannah Plus One*, there is the temper tantrum I referred to earlier and later in the story Hannah hurls a book at another student, cutting his face and earning herself a detention. Not very heroic acts. But in responding to what happens as the story progresses, Hannah grows and behaves in ways that I think are brave. Hannah has thrown the book at her classmate because he accused her of being a baby and having an imaginary friend, Megan. She has not been ready to give up Megan and she is not prepared to explain to the teacher what was behind her behaviour. So she must go to detention. And detention is run by Mr Claymore who keeps a classroom rat. Judith and Scheheradze may have had to face Holofernes and his army or a powerful and murderous spouse, but Hannah has to face rat face and detention. Detention becomes huge in her mind. As she thinks about it, it is printed in capital letters. She feigns illness on the morning of detention and is reluctantly taken to breakfast by her father. And then this happens.

Hannah makes a brave choice. Sure she is goaded by her sisters but it is when she is alone, drawing strength from her space and the positive warm words on her birthday card, that she makes her decision. And despite her misgivings, or the crocodiles in her belly, she affirms that decision in the car outside the school. This is the biggest thing she's ever had to decide. She draws on what she has to give her strength and we know she's scared, really scared, but still she does go to Detentions, she does confront the teacher Mr Claymore and the rat in the cage in his room, and she enjoys success, amid some slapstick, when that rat escapes from its cage.

It is in the third book, *Hannah and the Tomorrow Room*, that Hannah, I believe, rises to the occasion and behaves in a noble fashion. Hannah is to move from the room shared with the older girls to a room that her parents have built onto the house, her room. The title comes from her question - 'When can I move in,' and the response 'Tomorrow.' But things don't work out. Grandpa has been ill and must come to the house and recuperate. Hannah's feelings, her fear and insecurity are palpable as she listens to her parents

When Hannah tells her school friends they urge her to make so much mess, noise and trouble that Grandpa will leave of his own accord. She's unsure of this, she's never been deliberately bad before, but she decides to try it.

Step 1 - Snails in his slippers. He's been to France and he knows the taste of snails. He offers them to Hannah to share with him.

Step 2. Hannah puts her smelly bag under his bed - it's full of unwashed sports gear, dead sandwiches etc, and she hopes he'll be really offended. Then in a conversation with her Dad, she discovers that Grandpa has lost his sense of smell. What is more, the district nurse is coming to help him shower and will go into his room so will be confronted by the bag. Her parents discover this situation.

Step 3. Hannah and her friends advertise for a wife for Grandpa. They put a note on the supermarket notice board saying that he is looking for a wife and he is an elderly gentleman, interested in music and gardening. Of course, women ring up and Dad answers the phone and it doesn't take long before he realizes what's going on. So far fairly unheroic behaviour on Hannah's part.

Now when I got to this part, writing this book, I had a huge problem. Originally, I thought when I got to this point, I would bump off Grandpa. He's an old, sick man. Death is a powerful experience. The previous book had been about birth (as well as lots of other things) and so this could be about death. But I realized at that point that I couldn't do it. If I killed him off, in some strange way it would seem as if Hannah had killed him. Her wish had been fulfilled. I wasn't squeamish about death - just squeamish about saddling Hannah with that level of guilt. I also thought it would be the easy way

out - don't know how to resolve the conflict in the book - kill one off! Instead I went back to the drawing board. I wanted to redeem Hannah. She is the protagonist in the story and Grandpa is the antagonist. The conflict or struggle has been between them. What if somehow I bring them together and create a different antagonist that they are united against? What else are parents for? P72 (5 min)

Later at a family conference when Dad exhorts the girls to be nice to their grandfather Hannah speaks up, taking her Grandfather's side and putting forward what he isn't prepared to say himself. 80/1 Here she is at her best, for me. She fights for someone else at last. Sure she will benefit from the outcome but as she says to her mother a bit later on: p83

In each story then, Hannah, for me, is redeemed. In her own small way she has integrity, she behaves with honour and through the detail in the writing we understand perfectly what her motivation is. Detail plays an enormous part in understanding Hannah. It's the small moments and the significance attached to them that create the world and the person. *In Skating on Sand*, the children at the camping ground play a game where they each give their name backwards. *Hannah* is, of course, a palindrome and singles Hannah out as special, almost magical. It's not there as a fun game to fill up a page - it's significant in strengthening her, she feels her self worth.

The card in *Hannah Plus One*, is not just a card described for no reason or to give the idea that she's just turned 7. It's a statement by her parents that they believe in her, they trust her, they think she's wonderful and that gives her strength to do what she decides she has to do.

In *Hannah and the Tomorrow Room*, every detail during the meeting between Hannah and her grandfather in the middle of the night, is there to underscore his vulnerability. He is a frail, old man and if the situation is going to change, then Hannah will have to be the agent of that change. Detail, detail, detail. It's what makes us accept fiction as true.

Hannah has her successes. She overcomes obstacles, she challenges situations she believes are unfair. She goes in and acts when necessary and she behaves with integrity and truly responds to her world. She's a wonderful character to write and if she's not quite the heroic woman as are those I spoke of earlier, it's probably just her youth holding her back - give her time!!

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