

# Fragmented and Entwined: Migration Stories in *Sibyl's Cave* and Other Australian Fiction

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As a writer, a reader and a migrant, I am interested in the gaps in migration narratives and in where the stories touch other stories. These features suggest the difficulty of capturing the enormity of the migrational shift in one narrative and offer a sense of the nuances contained within a single person's experiences of migration. In this article I explore some ways in which individual migration stories have similar fragmented structures and make dynamic connections to wider stories, using examples from my own and other Australian fiction.

My own fiction, *Sibyl's Cave* (2004), tells the story of Billie, an Italian-born artist who moves to England under traumatic circumstances and later settles in Australia, making a living by painting images from her memories on gum leaves. Her displacement and dislocation mean that she has only partial truths about her own history, which changes when new (often conflicting) information is revealed; her personal (hi)story is fragmented and contingent upon other characters' narratives. This partial knowledge structured my act of writing Billie's story. Contact with other stories also shaped the writing—old stories (including Virgil's *Aeneid*), more recent stories, and personal stories (my own experiences of migration).

Fragmented structures and links to other stories appear in many Australian fictions about migration. The sample I use here includes Eva Sallis's *Hiam* (1998), Arnold Zable's *Cafe Scheherazade* (2001), Peter Lyssiotis and Nick

Petroulias's "New Troy" (2000) and Rosa Cappiello's *Oh, Lucky Country* [*Paese Fortunato*] (1984). Some of these works have fragmented structures and all contain intertextual links to other stories. The embedded stories in these texts are often not Australian in origin but have travelled to Australia from elsewhere, reflecting the migrational history that shapes one aspect of contemporary Australian identity.

#### BEGINNING WITH OTHER STORIES

*Sibyl's Cave* grew from older stories. For many years I'd been fascinated by the tale of a woman who told the future on leaves and was revered throughout ancient Greece and Rome. I wanted to know what happened to this oracle after the heroes or politicians left with their cryptic snippets of advice. Writing this novel gave me a way to find a voice for a character whose own narrative was often suppressed in myth and legend.

My interest led me to Virgil's *Aeneid*, the source of the leaf-shuffling sibyl. The hero of this work, Aeneas, is a man exiled from his home by war and searching for a new one. The notion of exile was a compelling one for me, as epitomised by the *Aeneid's* first line: "I sing of arms and of the man, fated to be an exile, who long since left the land of Troy" (3). Someone trying to find a new home after the old one was destroyed moved me more than the other epic journey narrative, Homer's *Odyssey* (one of the models for/sources of Virgil's *Aeneid* [Grant 191]). I later discovered that in another version of the Cumaean Sibyl's tale she was thought to be an exile herself, from Erythrae, who dies when she receives a document sealed with clay of her homeland (Parke 78-79). The resonance of this immediately struck me—one exile meets another at Cumae and together they enter the dingy realms of the Underworld.

In my mind, this chthonic place was the location for a metamorphosis—linked by their common exile, the Sibyl and the voyaging hero, Aeneas, merged. What emerged from the Underworld into my story was a new character: part-oracle, part wounded and wandering hero. She formed from these different (his)stories and kept growing and changing. I brought her forward into the contemporary world, to see how a modern-day heroic Sibyl would function and feel. In my story she is born on an island near Cumae: Aeneas's end country becomes her beginning point. The winds of the gods

blow her all the way to Australia, where she finds her new Troy on a small island in Sydney's Hawkesbury River.

#### FRACTURED IDENTITIES AND STRUCTURES IN MIGRATION STORIES

Billie's life is one of huge shifts between places, characterised by great gaps of things she doesn't know about her own heritage and family; moreover, the trauma of her childhood has caused her to forget aspects of these years. Movements between place, between what is known and what is unknown, both form and fracture her identity. For these reasons Billie experiences memories of her early life in fragments, which she often paints on leaves as a way to store and order the memories. These memories surface unbidden, triggered by familiar sensations or while Billie's mind is occupied with her painting, to interrupt the flow of her present life and transport her back to the past. To evoke a parallel experience in readers I built fragmentation into the structure of the novel, which alternates between Billie's time on the Hawkesbury and significant flashes of her past. Much of Billie's life is left out. This fragmented structure is shared by a number of other Australian stories about migration and its effects.

In *Hiam*, the protagonist's identity is shattered by her husband's suicide, a consequence of what Alison Bartlett describes as a "cultural migration . . . not easily translated onto Australian soil" (120). For Hiam:

Each life was a barely understood new species, some kind of hybrid monster. Hers was displayed before her in parts but there was no manual and no sense to them. It had scattered into unconnected shards which seemed never to have been part of the same thing. No recognisable liver, heart, or alimentary system could be clearly defined, waiting there to be put back in its place in a coherent scheme. There was no clear way to tell her story straight. (57)

The impossibility of telling Hiam's story "straight" (Sallis 57) results in a fragmented structure, where past events are narrated in flashback as Hiam meanders through desert regions in her husband's taxi. Here the desert functions like Billie's leaves—an aspect of the Australian landscape that allows fragmented memories to be articulated and remembered (in the double sense of being both recalled and put back together).<sup>1</sup>

Hiam's memories are not chronological but move between significant moments—ordered by emotional impact rather than linear time, and touching on some experiences while avoiding or delaying addressing others (for example, her husband's death, which is revealed late in the narrative):

Masoud had been hovering just outside the story, waiting and demanding to be told. Her memory veered away from him only to return, hesitant, but ultimately certain. If she let him in, she knew that he would leap up and, with a dizzying rush, shoot straight for the end. Screaming with fear, she would have to wrench herself off his back and cast herself away in freefall. She had delayed too long in touching much about Masoud, but he was edging in and, like a pregnant animal, she needed to creep away somewhere quiet and huddle around the pain. (90)

The novel's structure evokes for readers Hiam's experience of being fractured by grief and loss. Sallis also reverses the convention of using the present tense for present experiences—Hiam's desert trek is narrated in the past tense, interrupted by bursts of present-tense memories. Abbas El-Zein comments on the effect of reversing usual time conventions: "This reversal of the temporality of the novel creates a powerful intimacy between Hiam and the reader" (25). Drawn into the dramatic moment of the memory, we relive these moments with her, in fragments, in the now.

*Cafe Scheherazade* also has a fractured structure—it is spliced together from multiple stories. Centred on the café of the novel's title, Arnold Zable's story weaves a number of parallel threads, recounting how each of the main characters (Yossel, Masha, Avram, Zalman and Laizer) survived the Holocaust and other horrors. The characters' stories are also internally fragmented: "I cannot see any continuity in my journey,' he [Laizer] murmurs. 'Only broken lines'" (59). The level of detail and frequent shifts between these characters' stories make it difficult at times to tell whose tale belongs to whom—perhaps triggering in readers a small hint of the disorientation that the characters describe.

In the short story "New Troy" by Peter Lyssiotis and Nick Petroulias, the fragmentation is literal—the story appears as a cut-and-paste collage, built from different fonts and images, and told by multiple narrators (both migrants and those in the country of arrival). The story is without a plot in the conventional sense, created instead from statements from individuals on either side of a detention-centre fence. Separation defines the story, separation from family, from home country: "We see him writing a letter.

Later we see it's to his wife and son. He says he is being detained" (100). The blank spaces between text and images on the page emphasise the separations described within.

David Morris, writing about the work of Marguerite Duras, suggests the author uses fragmentation when aspects of experience (in particular, grief and trauma) elude textual representation:

The question for Duras is how to give voice to a pain that is now not only silent—that is, unexpressed—but almost inexpressible: completely bereft of language and voice. . . . Somehow in her work she finds the means to express or describe experiences that normally retreat from language. In her later novels she chooses to write in a fluid style of ellipsis, understatement, and poetic compression that fills her own texts with enigmatic gaps and absences. (123)

The texts described above are linked by elliptical structures that mimic the fractured identities, memories and experiences of their characters, whose migration stories seem impossible to tell in a single-threaded, continuous narrative. The gaps in these stories—what is left out, what is left behind, what cannot be said—are as resonant as what is included.

#### TELLING WHAT CAN'T BE TOLD THROUGH OTHER STORIES

At crucial points in *Hiam* the novel breaks from a fragmented realist narrative into other stories, for example, Hiam's mythologised retellings of her or her husband's earlier history (39-40), the Bluebeard-type story of the flesh-eating Jarjuf and his forbidden seventh room (105-18), or the fairytale of the mournful, speaking gazelle (97-103), all of which resemble tales from *The Arabian Nights*. At one stage Hiam is visited by a vision of the prophet Muhammed, who helps her find her way (126-27), in a scene that Bartlett describes as "a reflectively surreal passage that turns almost to fable" (120). Shirley Walker suggests that "many contemporary quest novels are enriched by traditional folklore or myth" (43). El-Zein emphasises the power of these stories in Sallis's text: "Stories—hallucinatory visions, dreams and fairy tales—begin to dominate her imagination and ours" (26). For El-Zein, the use of these different story types is a great strength of the novel and results in "a therapeutic fusion of reality and memory into something resembling fable" (26).

I would add that, in this context, the appearance of these stories may be another instance of Hiam being unable “to tell her story straight” (Sallis 57). The Jarjuf and gazelle fables come at moments of increasing trauma in the text, as elements previously avoided by the narrative are slowly revealed (for example, revelations about Masoud’s depression and suicide, and Hiam’s reaction to it). A shift from fractured stories into another kind of story entirely suggests that some aspects of tales can’t be told in their original format. These tales seem to use symbolism and nuance to explore aspects of the main narrative that cannot be articulated explicitly. The snippets of other stories offer a way to talk around the darkest places in the text, without having to voice them directly.

Perhaps telling other tales within our own allows us to tell stories sideways, rather than straight, like looking at the Medusa through the mirror of Perseus’s shield, rather than head on, thus not being turned to stone. Since we can’t “tell [the] story straight,” we tell parts of it in disguise. The connections to other, wider, older stories resonate and thrum, hinting at what is sometimes impossible to find words for.

#### CONSCIOUS INTERTEXTUALITY

Billie’s painted leaves link her to the *Aeneid*, as do the multiple versions of her name (Cibelle, Sybille, Bella and Billie), the novel’s title, the names of Didóne and Elissa (both connected to Dido of Carthage), and her birthplace. As a character, however, Billie is not aware of the links to the stories of the Sibyl and Aeneas; they are this writer’s imposition of an older narrative structure on the character’s life. For me the links speak about the longevity of this kind of emotional displacement, that people of the past and the present reel from geographic upheaval and the difficulty of setting down roots in new places, and that we constantly need to tell stories to understand such experience.

Links to this older story function politically in Lyssiotis and Petroulias’s short story “New Troy.” Like Billie, the characters in it are not aware of connections to Aeneas, but the title draws our attention to them. In this story Aeneas is now an asylum seeker and subject to the regulations and horrors of the mandatory detention system: “He returns and we detain

him. His face does not match the photograph in his passport. We suspect everyone—especially those arriving by boat” (98).

Rosa Cappiello uses the Sibyl’s tale quite differently in her novel, *Oh, Lucky Country* [*Paese Fortunato*], poking fun at our attachment to stories from our old countries. The narrator, Rosa, decides to become a fortune teller: “Being Neapolitan I’ll play the part of the Sibyl or a descendant of the Sibyl which is the same thing” (70). And the seer’s appeal to particular communities seems assured:

I’ve decided we’ll start off somewhere in Leichhardt or Marrickville, where there’s lots of Greeks and Italians. Lots of potential, guaranteed takings and later we can open up a chain of offices with machines which spew out coupons for programmed happiness. Your people, like mine, deserve to be conned. (71)

In this way, through politics and humour, old stories generate new life through fresh usages and keep the old forms alive as well.

Characters in Zable’s *Cafe Scheherazade* are also aware of their links with other stories, but see them as ways to get through past traumas to a new future, to tell the past so that it will not be forgotten. Stories of the café are linked with those spun by Scheherazade, who told tales to prevent her demise:

King Shahriyar, ruler of the ancient kingdom of Persia, having discovered the infidelity of his queen, resolved to have a fresh wife every night and have her beheaded at daybreak. This caused great consternation in the land. Fully aware of this grave situation, Scheherazade, the daughter of a senior court official, the grand vizier, contrived to become Shahriyar’s wife. She so amused him with stories for a thousand and one nights that the king revoked his cruel decree. The courageous queen also gained the love and gratitude of her people and, to this day, audiences the world over are seduced by her tales. (1)

The Scheherazade story provides a structure to the characters’ lives in Zable’s novel. Martin, the overarching narrator, is very aware of the links between the old story and “the cafe of old-world tales” (3). The lovers, Avram and Masha, decide to meet at Cafe Scheherazade in Paris, based on a similar incident in Erich Remarque’s *Arc of Triumph* [*Arc de Triomphe*] (Zable 155): “It pleased us to think we were like characters in a novel” (195). These characters also describe their actions in terms of the Scheherazade tale, only this time the gender positions are reversed. Masha says: “I was unsure; but

he kept me with his stories” (188). Avram adds: “A thousand and one nights it would take to tell them all” (188). This is a kind of circular link—the original tale gives its name to a café overseas, which is used in a novel, where characters meet, then a café of the same name is set up in Australia, which provides a space for the kind of storytelling undertaken by its *Arabian Nights* namesake.

At the St Kilda café, both happy and sad tales are told. Telling the stories to each other, to Martin, keeps the stories alive, and, by extension, preserves the memories and identities of the tellers: “In Scheherazade survivors were regrouping, old worlds were being recreated, and festering wounds were being healed” (171). Like Scheherazade of *The Arabian Nights*, these characters tell stories to get through the night, not literally this time, but emotionally—a way of dealing with the shared horror of what they have experienced on their various migration journeys, a way of surviving. Walker describes this as a “quest . . . in the collective memory for stories of suffering and survival during the holocaust” (45).

This storytelling quest at the café seems to function on two levels. Firstly, the stories and the act of telling them provide a centre in the chaos and fragmentation of the tellers’ histories; comfort comes from the repeated telling of the stories, like the use of worry beads, deep breathing or other calming rituals. In the café, Laizer makes the following comment to his friend Yossel:

“So! I can see it now! I know your little tricks. You are winding up to tell us your *bobbe mayses* about your wonderful Warsaw and Krochmalna Street. You are preparing to tell us about your no-good friends Mendel Mandelbaum and Stanislaw the pimp. And how you became a hero in underpants.” (65)

While Laizer voices frustration at the predictability of Yossel’s story, it is evident that repeated tellings have made him deeply familiar with it and that the frustration is also partly affectionate. In this context telling stories (including those linked to other stories) perhaps provides a way to cope with the chaos, horror and grief of the past by actively constructing it into something familiar and ordered, like T. S. Eliot’s “fragments I have shored against my ruins” (79).

Secondly, telling these stories creates a community. As one story snuggles inside another, nested like Scheherazade’s tales themselves, a sense of companionship develops in the St Kilda café. For Walker, “Zable creates an



ambience where history, fable and personal memory coalesce to re-create the old world in moving detail” (45). Each listener comes to understand what the other’s experience might have felt like. Since many of the stories touch on similar horrors, the listeners find something of themselves in the telling, and an empathetic connection is established. The common understanding of “empathy” is like the definition found in the *Macquarie Dictionary*: “[a] mental entering into the feeling or spirit of a person or thing; appreciative perception or understanding” (618). The layered stories in *Café Scheherazade* make a connection, reaching out to touch both the listeners in the café and the reader. Zable’s style of storytelling encourages this:

So join us, dear reader. Don’t be shy. Here, have a slice of Black Forest cake. On the house. And a glass of red. Savour it. Feel the glow spreading over your cheeks. Allow the taste to linger in the mouth. It is a pleasant feeling, no? Are you comfortable? Sit back. Settle into your chair; and listen to *bobbe mayses*, grandma tales. (152)

Empathy connects not only the characters of the book but extends out to connect with us, the readers as well, inviting us into the welcoming space of the café and creating Walker’s “collective memory” both within and beyond the text (45).

#### UNCONSCIOUS INTERTEXTUALITY

Like my conscious decision to situate Billie’s story in the context of older stories, I had also consciously decided not to tell my own story of migration. It seemed too dull and mundane to warrant a novel. Here it is... In 1983 an 11-year-old girl boarded a plane at Heathrow with her family and disembarked at Sydney for a new life in Australia. It was raining at both airports. There’s nothing remarkable about this story—it happens every day. But as that girl, I know what it felt like—the sorrow and the grief and the confusion that comes from leaving behind all that is known, even though we were moving for a better life, even though we weren’t running from persecution or terror, just the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher. From early in the drafting of *Sibyl’s Cave* it was definitely Billie’s story, not my own. I wanted to discover her lost memories, which surface in her art, her painted leaves, and in the beginning stages I avoided anything explicitly autobiographical. What I didn’t expect was

the way aspects of my own migration story would weave their way into the novel.

Confronted with the fictional question of what Billie would feel like on arrival in Australia, or how might she react to the landscape, I found I unconsciously fell back on my own experiences, and so some of my memories became Billie's. Almost without my realising it, Billie inherited my recollections of my early days in Australia, my initial sense of the landscape (which was panic at the desiccation and dull colours), the inability to connect with this place for a long time, not to see it as home, and, finally, the moment of revelation when for the first time my eyes were able to see the landscape as beautiful. This allowed me to make an empathetic leap between what I knew and felt, and what Billie might, even though the rest of our lives were so very different.

As a migrant writing the fictional history and memories of another migrant, I found the lines between each category blurred. My story of crossing borders crossed some itself—not into autobiography, certainly, but into fiction infused with elements of personal history. And fragments of my memories became scattered through Billie's. Perhaps, while the conscious part of me didn't want to tell my story, another part wanted something of those memories to be preserved, even if retold in another form. Perhaps choosing to write a story with some commonality to my own reflects a hidden need to tell this story, to explore some of the displacement and sorrow that can come from shifting countries, and to preserve some aspect of that, even if hidden in fiction, and even if the upheaval is minor compared to other people's experiences.

My initial resistance to writing the story of my own migration was that it wasn't interesting enough, that the mundane sounding events didn't correlate with the emotional intensity of the experience. Perhaps writing Billie's story gave me a chance to explore my own feelings about migration, protected by the disguise of fiction. With the intrusion of my own memories into Billie's text came great uneasiness. I wondered if writing Billie's story, with its drama and traumatic displacements, was a way to make the events of the story reflect the displacement experienced by that 11-year-old girl at Sydney Airport, a colonisation of Billie's story by my own.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

The few stories of migration I've considered in this paper often are not seamless or separate or absolute, but gain life and additional resonance from the gaps within them and from where they touch other stories. One linear story in isolation may not capture or express the feeling of the shift, so we tell stories in pieces, some of which may link to, resonate with and be affected by, other fragmented stories. When the various stories touch, joined by empathy, they form a community. That community of stories seems better suited to explore the enormity of the migrational shift than one story standing alone.

Obviously, and glaringly obviously, migration stories aren't the only ones to use fragmented structures or to make links to other stories through allusion, symbolism, intertextuality or allegory—these are standard literary techniques. Experimental and feminist writers frequently play with fragmented structures. *The Arabian Nights* has stories within stories. Virgil's *Aeneid* doesn't follow a simple linear narrative—it begins in Carthage, six years after the fall of Troy, then gives readers the story of the fall as Aeneas tells it to Dido. Virgil's nod to Homer is also one early example in a long and fertile history of texts harking back to others, for a variety of reasons, for example, the political re-writings and revisions and playful PoMo texts like those of Kathy Acker ("The End of the World of White Men") or Angela Carter's revisionist fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*. Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* shifts into a fairytale style after the protagonist decides to move out of her difficult home (137-44). Earlier, tales of the Arthurian Sir Perceval intersperse the text.

Is it that the migration stories explored briefly in this article reflect a general literary tendency towards fragmentation and intertextuality? Could gaps and intertextual links described above, as in other stories, demonstrate that we as storytellers are locked into the patterns and subjects that have come before, that the places where the stories touch are simply similarities of structure and content, drawn from thousands of years of shared tales, which, in their contemporary manifestations have migrated from elsewhere and are adding "to the mythology of an ancient land," as Zable's narrator states (113)? Or do these fragmented and entwined stories of displacement function in a specific and unique way?

## FALLING SILENT

Zable's novel ends with two characters, Zalman and the narrator, watching the dawn in St Kilda. Having told and heard the stories through many nights, a quiet peace settles upon the pair:

We follow the rim of the sea. Phosphorus dances on the lips of shallow waves. We walk as silence descends on the bay. We walk as our own voices are stilled, and are left trailing in our wake. One tale is ending, while others begin.

Storytelling is an ancient art. They stood by the fire, the first storytellers, and held their audiences entranced. Their faces glowed, half in darkness, half in light. Their voices flowed into the star-laden night. They recounted tales of battles fought, the first woman, the first man, the first moments of love and hate.

Yet, perhaps there is something beyond our endless recycling of words. The faintest traces of sunrise seep into the sky. The first rays are moving. They wipe away the stars, one by one, teardrops suspended in space. They sweep away the shadows from the night-darkened sea. Blues give way to silvers, tinged with rose. A ship makes its way in the emerging light, bound for foreign ports. . . . The ancients knew such moments well, the calm after the storm.

We sit on the foreshore, against the retaining wall, Zalman and I, our backs turned to the streets, beyond desire, beyond reach, in the time before tales.

*And, seeing that the dawn had broken, Scheherazade fell silent, as at last she was at liberty to do. (220-21)*

Here, the stories within this novel—migratory, fragmented and multi-vocal—are placed in the context of all the other stories that have come before, since humanity first shared tales, and then these connections are let go. The tellers need no longer speak. The characters enter, paradoxically, a “time before tales” (221). The silence that follows—a final textual gap—allows both the listeners and the tellers to absorb the echoes and resonances of what has been said, and of what cannot be said. In the quiet after the words, teller, listener and reader contemplate that ineffable “something beyond” (220).

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thanks to Sue Martin for this idea. Alison Bartlett discusses the role of the desert landscape in *Hiam* and other Australian fictions in her article “Desire in the Desert: Exploring Contemporary Australian Desert Narratives.” Thanks also to Sue Martin and Matthew van Hasselt for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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