



Bethany Bacon

Creative Writing Dissertation

Watch the Water Colour

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WATCH THE WATER COLOUR

A TALE
ABOUT
GROWING
UP...

SOMETIMES
TOO
QUICKLY.



Mr Bentley told me to move to the front of the class where he could keep a ‘close eye’ on me. He thought such a command was a punishment. I, however, relished the opportunity to watch the screensaver on Mr Bentley’s computer. The little DVD logo would bounce around the screen and I would clench the edge of his seat in anticipation for it to hit right into the corner. In that short moment reality was perfectly aligned.

Mr Bentley would lollop down the school corridors, one hand hitching up his corduroys to prevent revealing anymore of his builder’s bum. His other paw would grasp onto a stack of tattered exercise books with coffee stains and frayed edges. We were always too afraid to ruin our books because of what happened to Sam Silverton when he covered the back page of his maths exercise book with Match Attack stickers. So the messiness of this particular pile could not have been the pupils’ doing.

It was Mr Bentley’s late-night marking that tainted their colour-coordinated bar charts, made perfectly straight with sharpened pencils and Shatterproof rulers. But Mr Bentley would momentarily forget the effort exerted by his class as he slurped from his Nat Geo mug filled with sour, Irish coffee and puffed on his left-over Cuban cigar from Christmas. Mr Bentley filled his dull life with few luxuries, and those he chose to indulge in he insisted would either inebriate¹ or intoxicate². Either way, a life expectancy shortened along with a lighter pocket would yield an even more lonely, bald singleton to reach for his packet of sleeping pills on a Saturday night. These intricacies of Mr Bentley’s life have only become so vivid in my later years, as I also all too often waste the Boodle’s Gin that I promised I would save for Friday date night with Opie. But, instead, I mix the lavish³ libation⁴ with Tesco’s own brand lemonade.

¹ Make drunk.

² Lose control of oneself due to alcohol or drugs.

³ Fancy.

⁴ A drink.



As an aside, I must explain my decision for indulging in such lofty⁵ vernacular⁶. I have a legion⁷ of words at my disposal thanks to my love of reading. This, I hope, will come across in my writing. I believe to write one must read. And when I say read, I mean remember and reflect too. Enjoy what you read but also allow the thoughts that reading creates to snowball. Look back on the novels you have enjoyed and make notes on your favourite sections. This is what I do. In this case, I have provided some explanations for difficult words, in the event that you have somehow forgotten your most valuable possession, your dictionary. Most importantly, I hope these footnotes help you better understand my digressions⁸. Anyway, back to memories of primary school...

I often visualised other peoples' lives whilst in geography class. This detailed imagining of Mr Bentley's evenings after he returned home from teaching came from stories that Uncle Christian told me about his own experiences. Uncle Christian was Aunty Lana's late husband. He had tragically ended his own life during an evening similar to the one I now suspect Mr Bentley would often encounter. Only since have I realised just how Mr Bentley's loneliness easily spiralled into isolation and deep-rooted depression. These details I overheard at a school reunion a few years back, Mr Bentley almost faced the same fate as Uncle Christian, but he survived. I often wondered what it felt to be labelled as a 'suicide survivor'. It turned out the news spread quickly. Many knew about his circumstances, but he never spoke about his mental turmoil to others. I have always regretted standing by and not offering a listening ear. Of course, I was just a child, but I would never doubt the intelligence and honest perspective of a child.

⁵ Elevated and ornate.

⁶ The kind of language used in specific regions of a country.

⁷ A great number.

⁸ Departure from the central topic under discussion.

Mr Bentley told Aunty Lana one parents' evening that I needed to stop day dreaming and concentrate more in class. But geography was about exploration and discovering how other cultures thrive. I argued that my day dreaming was simply my own geographical experiment into human behaviour, and I should instead be rewarded for such an inquisitive field study. Rewards usually came in the form of merits. Every time you did something that the teachers believed to be good, they would sign your House Card, which you kept on your person at all times. At the end of each week the headmaster, Mr Straight, would announce which house had collected the most points that week. This helped us keep track of which houses were succeeding and which were falling by the wayside. At the end of the half term the house with the most points would be rewarded with an outing of some sort.

My house only won once. I put our regular failure down to Sam Silverton. He was the first person I met at school and we became inseparable pretty quickly. It was a sunny day in September when I had to leave Aunty Lana for the first time. I was the only child who cried that morning. There were a few tantrums and one or two jumping with joy for their new found freedom, yet no one but I shed a tear. Miss Polly, the Reception and Year 1 teacher picked me up and took me to 'a boy who absolutely loves school already'. Little did they know that Silver (as he was eventually dubbed) had in fact smuggled a Gameboy past Miss Polly in his Spiderman underpants. I loved playing Gameboy, but Mum and Aunty Lana said screens would turn my eyes square – only at the ripe age of 8 did I realise that staring at a sheet of luminous glass, which was in fact *rectangular*, would in no way remould the shape of my eyeballs.

Silver was always getting in trouble, usually for practising his gymnastics stunts outside of gymnastics class. One day he threw himself from the football field into the tennis courts but missed by just a foot. He fell, head first, into the concrete passage way between the two brick walls separating the designated sport areas. He survived, although at first, I prepared myself

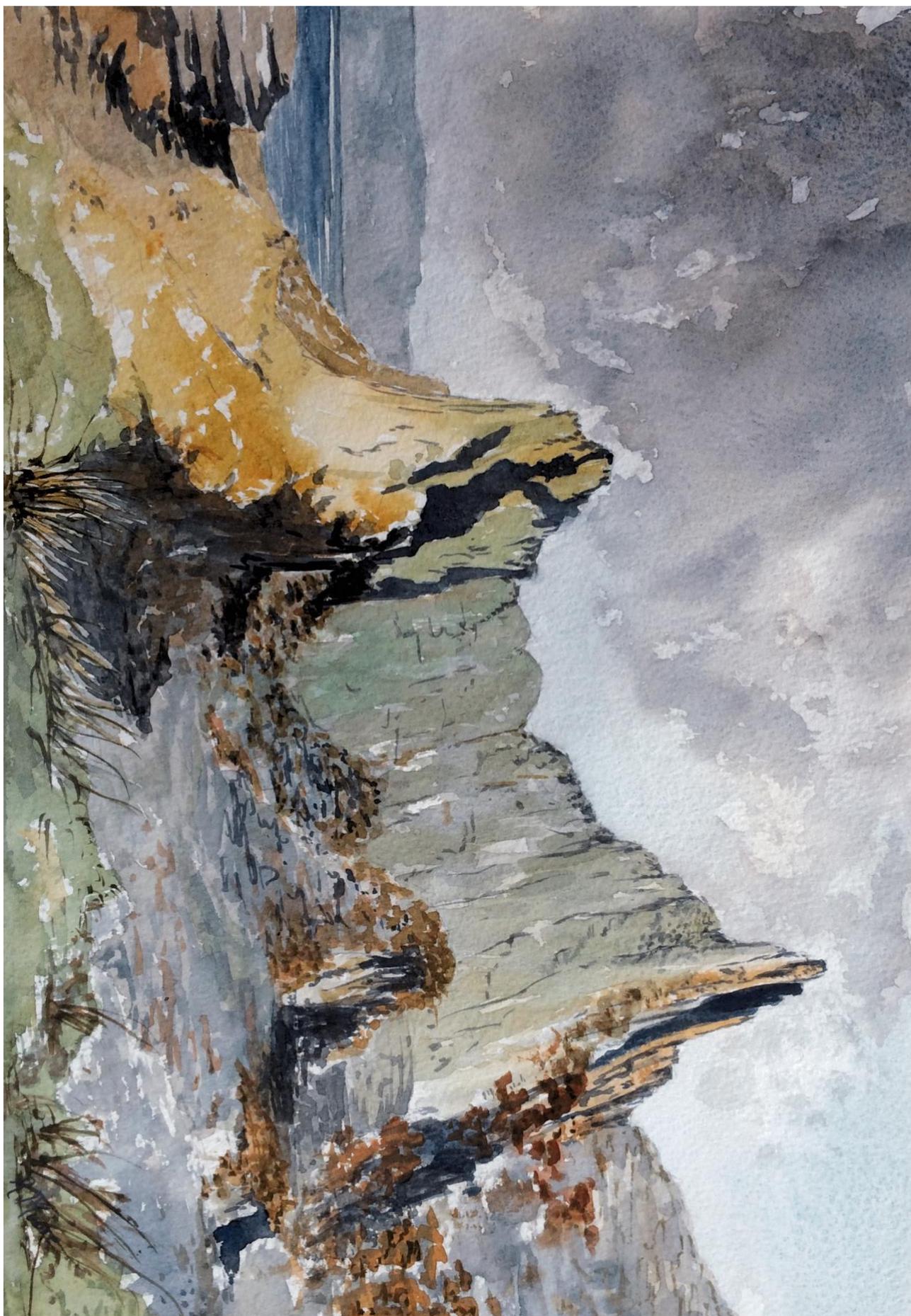
for the worst. We witnessed his athletic pyrotechnics⁹ from the water fountain where we had been assembling to play Forty Forty Home¹⁰. Silver was airlifted to hospital by helicopter! He was the talk of the school for weeks. He cost us 20 house points for that spectacle and although I was worried about him coming back in one piece, I didn't want to let on to the other kids that I cared that much.

Looking back on that now, I would have felt far less anxious at school if I had opened up about my concern. I grew a tough skin, although the worries inside still filled me up. I was a balloon fit to burst, and, I'll tell you from experience, rubber starts to show its cracks if it's stretched enough.

Silver was in hospital for weeks. I worried endlessly about his wellbeing, but I was too afraid to tell anyone. The doctors were reluctant to tell Silver's friends about the many surgeries he had to have and the needles he was being prodded with every day because they didn't think we were strong enough to withstand the truth. I was petrified of anyone knowing about my own fears for Silver because they might have thought I was weak. With hindsight, if the adults had known that the boys in our year wanted to talk about how we were feeling, they would have told us the truth, to prevent our imaginations from spiralling unprovoked thoughts into murmuring anxieties and eventually perpetual thought loops. Ending these anxious cycles comes with just one brave conversation.

⁹ An amazing performance.

¹⁰ If you do not know this game, I would highly recommend it. I spent hours in the square next to my cousins' house playing Forty Forty Home and hiding in the neighbour's vegetable patch. Although, I would avoid trampling on prized vegetables, as adults are quite protective over their home-grown produce.



At least Silver came back to school eventually. He had war wounds to show off, so didn't waste time getting back into the playground to flaunt his black eye, stitches in his skull and a not so attractive wonk in the bridge of his nose to the girls in the year above.

Mum wasn't around that often, but she was always the character that crept into my thoughts most often. I sometimes envied the time the other children had with their parents. Like the way Rachel's mummy might plait her hair for school in the mornings or about how many slices of Nutella on toast Mickey might get for breakfast from his dad. I was jealous of their strong support networks back at home. But this usually manifested itself in strong urges to remember the specific curvature of Mum's face or the smell of her hair after a shower before she left for work. I knew exactly what she looked like when I had just seen her. From the birth mark on the back of her neck to her double-jointed big toe. I even knew what her work uniform smelled like. But when she went away for long periods I tended to forget. She would tell me to 'watch the water colour' across Lake Windermere, which our house looked over. She said that times would 'fly by' if I drew the changing reflections on the lake as the trees turned rusty over October. This was one of her busy months because of October Half Term. She would jet across the globe and I would paint until my orange colour palette ran dry.

I didn't think about my dad because it hurt too much. I couldn't remember him at all. He hadn't gone that long ago but I guess so many new experiences are had at 10 years-old that you tend to forget your old memories quite quickly. I recalled his twitch. I thought about the jutting movement his face made when he typed on the computer. There were two ways he would tick. He would sometimes knock his head to his shoulder, as if trying to swat a fly with his ear. Or he would blink his eyes really tight as if to block out what he was seeing and wish himself somewhere else. These ticks seemed so real in my memory. However, as the years

went on, I began to question whether they had become phantom memories¹¹. Had I thought about them so much that they had become more and more clear in my head and yet further and further from the truth? I didn't know where he was or how to access him. Sometimes I questioned whether he could be living like Mr Bentley, in almost total social seclusion, but there was nothing I could do to help him.

I was right. One of the many reasons why I often tell people to not underestimate children is because of what I have realised about myself. When I was just 10, I noticed the suffering of others. I recognised the pain Mr Bentley felt he couldn't tell anyone about, and I correlated the cause of Uncle Christian's passing to similar mental health issues that Mr Bentley had been experiencing. I noticed this but questioned it still. I missed my dad but didn't know how to speak about those feelings. I wanted to tell people but where would I begin? How would I approach the subject of my own mental health?

I had my dad's phone number because Mum had to keep him in her contacts for 'financial reasons'. I knew where her contacts book was though and sometimes, when I really worried about my dad, I would call his phone and wait until he picked up. When he did, I would hear a faint 'mhmm' at the other end of the line. I would wait a moment, just to hear him breathing. Obviously, he was alive, he had just answered the phone. But I needed the confirmation of those first few breaths. I didn't want to hear him get angry about there being a cold caller again. I had done that once before and the furore¹² he created at the other end of the phone shocked me from ever lingering¹³ again. The 'mhmm' was reassurance enough to know that my dad was OK, or at least alive.

¹¹ Memories that might be related to something that did in fact take place but have been warped over time if they have been thought about frequently.

¹² Sudden outbreak of anger or shock.

¹³ Stay in a place due to a reluctance to leave.

Without the presence of my dad, I became more appreciative of Mum and Aunty Lana. I tried to burn the image of Mum on my brain for those periods when she would be away for work. Her uniform was a red silky blouse tucked into a smart navy skirt with a white scarf tied in a bow around her neck. I thought she looked shiny when she dressed in these clothes. I liked the little hat she wore best because it had no real purpose but made her look like a sailor. I found this funny and would flick the hat off her head when she picked me up after a long shift. It would tumble down her back and I would run behind her to try to catch it on my head. Her uniform smelt like musty lavender, an odour that often wafted from Grandma's airing cupboard where I would hide during games of hide and seek with Aunty Lana.

Mum worked as a flight attendant on British Airways. Some of the kids at school called her an air stewardess just because they knew I didn't like it. Mum told me not to ever describe anyone's job according to their gender. This, she said, was 'discrimination'¹⁴ and that everyone should be treated equally, no matter what private parts we were assigned at birth. I thought Mum was one of the smartest people I knew.

I didn't tend to expel too much of my energy on antics with children at school. Other kids had friendship groups and would compete in fantasy football online together and discuss the recent transfers that had affected their Dream Teams. I, however, preferred to spend more time with Aunty Lana and Mum, when she was around. We don't always have control over the people that come into and out of our lives. But we have the choice to appreciate the time we have with those that choose to stay. I was honest with Mum and Aunty Lana. My dad's departure came as a shock. Sometimes it was hard to find the words to tell Mum and Aunty Lana that I was feeling lonely. One time I drew a frowny face on my wrist when I wouldn't leave my room to come for dinner. That's all it took for them to understand that I wasn't feeling

¹⁴ Unjust judgement of a person, often based on something that they cannot control, for example, gender, age, race, or sexuality.

myself. When my head seemed empty and my limbs felt heavy, I'd just draw the sad face and then at least I wouldn't hold the weight of the sadness alone. Sometimes they'd sit by me and other times they'd leave me some green tea and a little time to breathe. I realised that emotions can't always be described, but if I relayed to Aunty Lana and Mum when I wasn't feeling myself, they didn't have to wait and worry. I knew they wouldn't keep anything from me either. No matter what, Mum always advised to sit on the stool in the hallway where the window looks out onto Lake Windermere and watch the water colour. Watch the sun rise and arch across the water until it hid behind the hills in the distance in wait for the next day's dance around the sky. Watch the colour of the water change as the clouds opened and turned the waves from grey to green. Time ticked by and eventually the colours I felt inside would change too.

I suppose this is why I am writing this story. I want to be honest and upfront with you. Now that I have little Oscar, I have a whole new perspective of what being a single parent means. What it meant for Mum. However, she had to deal with sexism¹⁵, something I will never have to encounter personally. I think I was always interested in her female perspective. But now I want to try and sympathise with the struggles women face, for Opie's sake if not for anything else. Opie is my wife. I love her to Tesco's and back – at least, that's what I tell her every morning – an understatement of course. Opie has always said that the respect I have for women was what first attracted her to me. I've always had a strong sense of female admiration. I think that came from Mum and Aunty Lana.

Even from that ripe young age of 12, I always looked up to my 'double Mums', as I liked to call them. They were my heroes. But when Mum became ill everything changed.

¹⁵ Discrimination based on someone's gender.

I wasn't called out of an English lesson whilst studying *Twelfth Night* or playing Forty Forty in the football field during break time. It wasn't one of those dramatic moments you see on TV when the teacher comes to collect the child in question *so* sympathetically that the entire break-time population turns around to nose about what is going on. I was in my room, drawing, as usual. I had recently been given Aunty Lana's old Olympus OM-2¹⁶ and had taken some arty pictures of my cat, Alfie, in the sunlight. I had pinned the images to the wall above my desk and was about to finish tracing the curvature of his back when I heard three faint taps on my door. They sounded like those awkward knocks you do when you're entering the headmaster's office to say sorry for being noisy during assembly. I thought the person on the other side of the door was about to apologise for eating my last Müller corner. On a normal day, I would roll my eyes and prepare for the sulk. I would be ready to make Aunty Lana feel so guilty that she would ask to take me out for ice cream and waffles at that new American pancake house down the road as compensation¹⁷. But, this time, I was so engrossed in my new pictures that I only briefly puzzled upon the outcome of such a strange knock before returning back to my sketch.

'Sweetie.' It was Aunty Lana. I was right. 'I've got to...' her voice broke. She sounded like Father Patrick just before he was about to crescendo¹⁸ into the most profound, but of course boring, part of his sermon¹⁹. 'I've got to speak to you,' I swivelled around on the spinney desk chair my dad had got me when he decided I needed a 'man's desk' to work proficiently²⁰. I grabbed either side of the desk to halt me directly facing Aunty Lana, a 180-degree villain spin,

¹⁶ A camera from the 1970s.

¹⁷ To compensate or make amends.

¹⁸ Gradually become louder or more intense.

¹⁹ A speech made during church services often inspired by a passage in the Bible.

²⁰ In a skilled or competent manner.

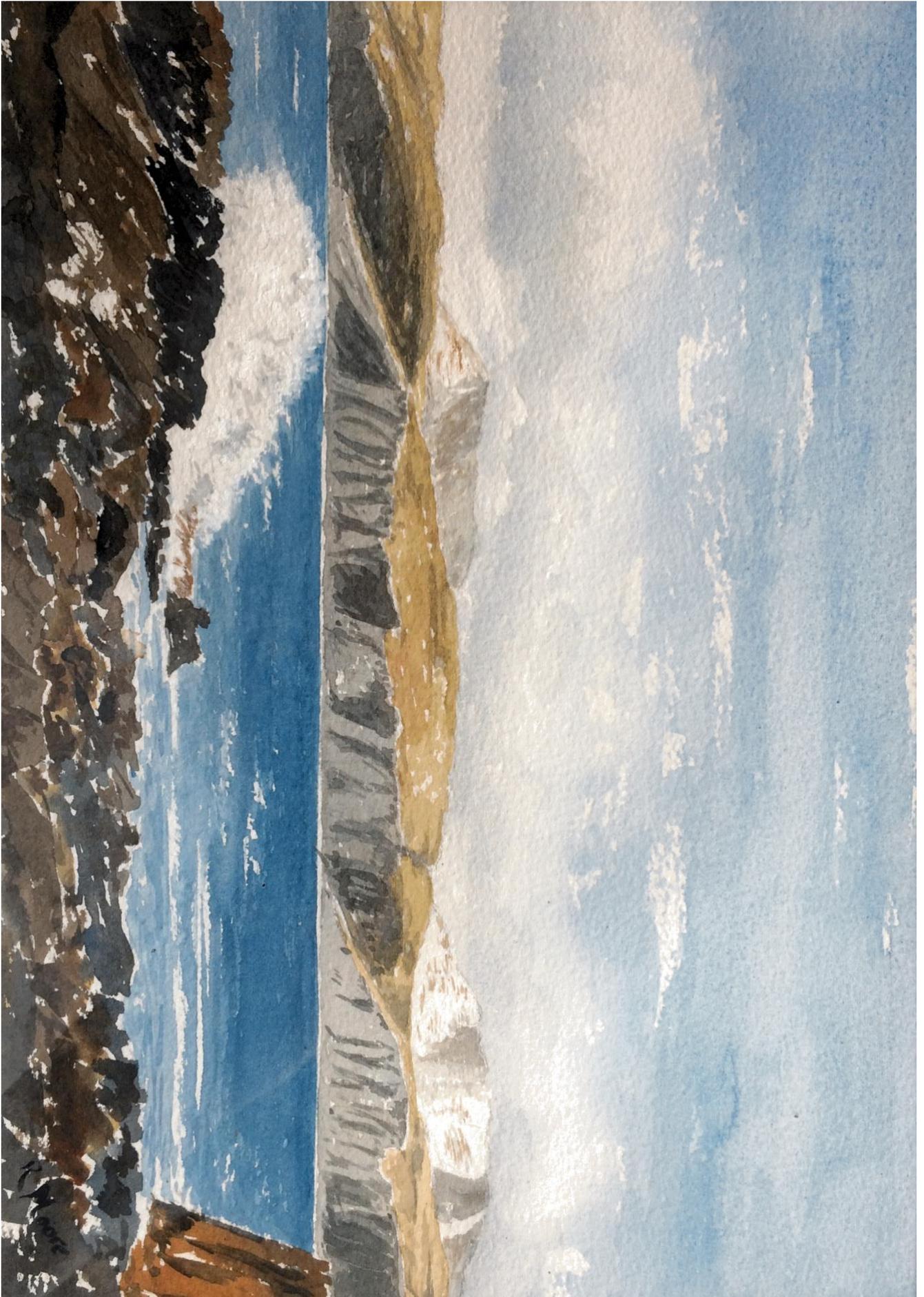
just like when Emperor Palpatine²¹ turns to meet Young Skywalker²² and greets him with the legendary, ‘I have been expecting you’. Aunty Lana looked more serious than I anticipated.

‘Sweetie,’ her voice broke again, ‘I have some bad news.’ My heart sank at that moment. I knew it was something personal. It was about someone we knew. She looked at me gravely. I knew she wouldn’t move her eyebrows in that manner if she had broken a wing off one of my Air Force 1 models. ‘Your mum has had a stroke, darling.’

I cried, a lot that year. And the year after. And I kept crying by myself, until I realised, I could reflect upon it. I could talk about Mum’s passing. I spoke to Aunty Lana and even Mr Bentley about how much I missed her. But sometimes, I still had to draw the sad face and just be alone.

²¹ The main antagonist from the *Star Wars* franchise.

²² The main protagonist from the *Star Wars* franchise.



It was at our favourite boathouse on Lake Windemere when I realised just how proud I was that Oscar is my child. He exceeded everything I wish I had been at his age.

We were waiting down on the sandy bank next to what we liked to call our ‘local surf shack’, when in reality, it was just a shed housing a few kayaks and small rowing boats. ‘The Shack’ attracted customers like us but a little different: usually overweight single parents with hyperactive, pre-pubescent gremlins. We didn’t quite fit into this category, thank God, but I probably felt just as lonely as the beer-bellied football dads.

Oscar was intent on racing me across the lake that day. We had only ever used the rowing boats – today we were going to kayak! Whoever got to the other side first would get first dibs at the sticks on offer to build our dens in the forest. It was a friendly race, of course. We were racing to see who could help the other best. We had meant to venture across to the other side many times. Today would be the day we would explore the ‘haunted forest’ and look for creepy-crawlies to put in our bug hotel.

I tried to be honest with Oscar and give him as much freedom as possible. I hoped to foster an inquisitive nature within him. So, when we were queueing for the kayak, I asked him how much the price to rent a kayak was. When I asked him a question like this he, with an uncertain response, looked around. He inspected his surroundings to look for clues. I glared in the direction of the chalk board. Oscar was always on the ball. His eyes shot up, chasing mine.

‘We need to pay £5, Dad,’ Oscar said eagerly. ‘That’s right,’ I replied, proud of Oscar yet again. He was only 3-years-old when he learnt to count out change. I hated having handfuls of coppers weighing down my pockets. At the time, contactless credit and debit cards hadn’t yet been invented. I used cash to stay on top of my spending. It was Oscar that suggested I pay for my daily newspaper with the change in my trousers. So, every morning, before nursery, I would take Oscar down to John’s shop and he would count out my change to make sure there was enough to pay for *The Times*. John’s shop was our local corner shop. John was a jolly man

who wore a cockney flat cap and half-moon glasses on the end of his nose. He usually sat on a wobbly wooden stool in front of the tobacco counter. He told me once that he had had a break in whilst he was in the back of the store restocking the cereal. The thieves had run in with baseball bats and grabbed all the cigarettes they could get their gloved mitts on. When John heard Bob, the local drunk, wail like a crushed pile of bagpipes he darted to the front of the shop. But by the time he reached the counter the hooligans²³ had made for the street and John's most expensive merchandise²⁴ had been snatched. So, from now on, John always kept watch over his fortifications²⁵ at the front of the shop.

John and I would tell Oscar this story to warn him about the danger of putting yourself in harm's way. Bob got out of that situation alive because he didn't try to stop the thieves. 'Sometimes,' John would explain, 'It's just not worth being the hero.' I would nod along, shooting an agreeable smile over to John. John and I had never spoken about the dangers of teaching young boys to 'man up' and rise to the fight, rather than taking a step back and assessing every situation with diplomacy²⁶. However, we both knew it was a lesson he had to learn to become a conscientious²⁷ and compassionate adult. We also recognised the potential for such shocking stories to become, to some extent, scarring, for someone so young. And so, John would give him a '10p Chocolate Frog' (also known as Cadbury's famous Freddo) to pacify the effect of the fear we had induced. Oscar would listen intently with his beady eyes. I could tell his malleable brain was absorbing the overwhelming circumstances like a little sea sponge, with big holes ready for new cells to plug them with fresh information.

Back at Lake Windemere Oscar was so eager to pay for the kayaks that his ankles were quivering as he reached up like a climber attempting to catch up to his buddy whilst ascending

²³ Someone who is rowdy and/or causes trouble.

²⁴ Goods that are bought and sold.

²⁵ A strong, tall wall to defend an army or population against attack.

²⁶ Dealing with people sensitively and with tact.

²⁷ Aware of others and considerate about doing one's best.

a mountain. Oscar bopped up and down on his toes like he needed the loo whilst making a seal-like squawk, still longing to gain the shop keeper's attention. The lady behind the counter had an over-sized plastic name tag that read 'Bella'. She leant forward and peered down, as if inspecting a smoking car bonnet.

'I'm sorry little man,' she said, 'but I can only offer you a double kayak, as you're a little young to be paddling one by yourself.' Oscar deflated onto his heels.

'Excuse me, but if you wouldn't mind could I possibly rent a kayak for myself and my son?' A tall thin man with bouncy ginger hair and a large backpack with bats and balls reaching out from the zips had stepped right behind Oscar and I suddenly sprang into protective father mode.

'Excuse *me* but my son was ordering a kayak for *us*. If you wouldn't mind waiting your turn, I would be rather grateful.' If I ever found myself in conflict such as this, which thankfully was a rarity, I would make sure to stick up for what was right, but in a manner that was polite and keeping myself and my family out of harm's way. Mum used to tell me to 'kill them with kindness.'

'Excuse *me* but this young lady just told your son that he cannot rent the kayak he asked for. So, he can return to the shop when he has made a decision about the kayak he is allowed to rent.' The man had spun around and was now facing me straight on with a stern look in his eyes. He had a triangular nose that kinked in the middle, a square jaw and dimpled chin. He had a couple cuts on his cheeks, presumably from shaving when in a rush to drop his child off at some sort of school production or another (something I could safely sympathise with). His eyes were a sharp stony blue, which his flecks of silver hair brought out in the sunlight. Everything looked all too familiar.

As I say, I wasn't the argumentative type. I stood ready for him to spin around and hit me with some self-empowering, macho language that would make him look 'tough' in front of

his son. I reached down for Oscar's hand. 'It's alright, Oscy,' I said. 'Let's come up with plan B over by the benches, eh?' I looked up at the other man and smiled, thinking it best to simply lead by example and live and let live. I halted. He wasn't just familiar, I recognised him. He stood awkwardly on one leg with both hands in his pockets and his shoulders slumped. I knew a ginger lad with bad posture all too well. But could it be? All these years and I remembered his features down to a crook in his nose? Surely no one could have a memory that precise. He looked up from his son. Our eyes locked. His eyebrows raised. I was right. Wasn't I? He must know, surely?

'Sam Silverton?' I accidentally crowed without further thought. 'Silver?'

It was him though, I knew it. Having screeched without thinking, a bit *my* saliva was now resting just above his upper lip. I tried so hard to look away from the little bubble now reflecting the light bouncing from the clouds above us, but it was calling for me to wipe it from his face. I knew I had embarrassed myself enough already. I couldn't engage in another unwarranted gesture of awkwardness. But where would I look? *My* spit was resting on Sam Silverton's philtrum²⁸ and it would have to linger there if I was to remain an ordinary contributing human in this conversation.

'Archie Devaux?' Thank God, I thought. It was him. I relaxed my tight chest as Sam's response reassured me that I hadn't just shouted at a total stranger.

'How long has it been? Ten years? Longer?' I nodded and wiped my sweaty palms on the back of my corduroys²⁹, still in disbelief. 'Put it here, mate!' Sam stretched out his long, freckly arm and I sort of grabbed for it, so as to not seem in anyway nervous by the unexpected encounter. Words couldn't quite make their way from my lungs, past my vocal cords, and out through my mouth. So, instead, I made a little wheeze, something like a cat trying to cough.

²⁸ The section of tunnelling skin running from between the bottom of the nostrils down to the top of the upper lip.

²⁹ A velvet-like material with ridges, in this case fashioned into a pair of trousers.

Sam, politely, overlooked my social ineptitude and reached his other hand towards the palm of a small, ginger child who had been apparently standing behind him the entire time, unbeknownst to me. ‘This is Marty,’ said Sam. ‘He’s my eight-year-old.’

At this, I knew what to do. Oscar was my secret weapon! ‘This is Oscar!’ I blurted, a little too excitedly. ‘He’s *my* eight-year-old!’ Sam beamed at me with the sort of admiration Aunty Lana used to give me after correctly naming one of the finches³⁰ in our garden. Oscar stepped forward and confidently reached out his strong hand. ‘Nice to meet you, I am Oscar Austin Devaux.’

‘Wow,’ Sam replied, ‘Isn’t he quite the charmer.’ We were silent for a moment, all of us grinning at each other in a sort of wonder.

‘Would you still like to rent a kayak?’ An earthy voice hooted from behind us. It was Bella from the rental shop, we hadn’t realised we had kept her waiting for our decision.

‘Yes please.’ Sam leaned in to read her name tag, ‘Bella. We would like two double kayaks, please.’ Sam turned back to me. ‘Perhaps Marty and I can go in one and you and Oscar can share the other; that way we can race!’

‘That’s what I said we should do, didn’t I, Dad!’ Oscar beamed up at me.

‘Sounds like a plan to me,’ I replied.

‘Alright,’ said Bella, ‘If you just follow me, I will get you into your life jackets and then you can be on your way for a boating adventure!’ Bella sounded a little scripted³¹, but Oscar and Marty didn’t seem to notice, as they had already popped their shoes and socks off and were running in the direction of the wetsuit hut.

‘What a small world we live in, eh?’ Sam nudged me with his shoulder in a boyish manner. ‘We’ve got a lot to catch up on, don’t we, Archie?’

³⁰ A small bird that has an array of different variants, mainly found in Britain.

³¹ Scripts are used in theatre, television, and film. To say that someone is speaking as if they are ‘scripted’ suggests they are speaking words someone else has told them to speak.

‘A lot has happened since school.’ I began to feel a little solemn, as I thought back to the last time I had seen him. ‘It got quite tough after Mum passed, I think that’s why I became so distant.’

‘Well, Archie, you have nothing to be sorry for. You were rightfully distraught, and I feel awful for not being more understanding.’

I then recalled how our friendship had fizzled out. I isolated myself when Mum died. I didn’t quite know how to deal with death, I had never encountered such loss before. I was always so close to Mum and Aunty Lana. But when Mum had her stroke, Aunty Lana was, understandably, preoccupied with her care. Then there was Mum’s funeral and dealing with what she left behind: primarily the grief that was brought upon all of us.

‘I had to grow up pretty quickly,’ I said. That was all I could remember. One day I was selling Scooby doo bands in the playground with Sam and the next I was writing poetry by myself in the school’s art department. ‘I didn’t really know how to deal with all the emotions that losing Mum brought on.’

‘You just disappeared, Arch,’ Sam said desperately. It seemed this was something he had been reflecting upon for a while. ‘Where did you go? At school, I mean. You just stopped hanging out with us.’

‘I found peace in solitude, mainly. Looking back on that now, isolating myself just made me more vulnerable.’ I was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. I had allowed myself to bottle up this part of my past and focus on Oscar. Maybe this was the perfect time to unravel the feelings I had left to stagnate³² for so many years.

³² Become inactive. Often referred to as a body of water without a flow. This is often where disease breeds and so ‘stagnant’ works as a metaphor to describe the way things, when left untouched, can begin to fester and become a bigger problem.

‘We wanted to be there for you, Arch. Of course, we couldn’t completely empathise with what you were going through, but surely distraction would have been better than becoming so lonely?’

I paused for a moment. It was difficult to take all of this in. I wasn’t expecting to see Sam here, never mind dig up the dark happenings of my past. ‘Yes. I agree, Sam. I guess I just didn’t have the perspective I do now, eh?’ I tried to lighten the mood a little with my tone.

‘Well, I am glad you’re doing so well now. You’re a testament to your mum.’

I *had* come incredibly far since Mum died. I let that sink in for a moment. I smiled.

‘Even though she wasn’t there to guide me, her counsel before she passed drew a clear path for me to follow.’

‘I think you’re right, Archie. Mothers are essential for creating that rite of passage³³ from boy to gentleman, or girl to woman. I’m so glad Marty had Rosie as a strong matriarchal³⁴ figure in his life.’

‘Rosie Marshall? Is she Marty’s mother?’ I recalled Rosie from year 3. She had bright green eyes, shiny brown hair, and always had something to say about climate change.

‘Yes, she was. However, she is also no longer with us.’ Sam looked down at his toes and then it seemed as if something suddenly came over him and he reminded himself to hold his head up high. He lifted his brow and opened his vision out to the rippling water on the lake. ‘She had asthma. We were always very careful about remembering her medication. But it only took one day for us to forget. We were up climbing Pendle Hill. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon and Marty was running ahead with his cousins. We had the family up for the weekend. In many ways that made it harder. We all had to endure the heartbreak together. Anyway, she became out of breath about half way up. This wasn’t unusual, so I just slipped

³³ An important part of someone’s life that marks change. For example, something that causes someone to move from being a child to an adult.

³⁴ A powerful woman who is the head of a family or group of people.

my hand into her rucksack for her inhaler. When I couldn't feel the cool plastic rattling about, I started to worry. I pulled the backpack off her and searched it thoroughly. I got everyone to open their bags. That was when she became unconscious. We started CPR. My cousin Chris called for the ambulance, but it took 8 minutes for the helicopter to land and by the time the paramedics arrived she was already gone.'

Silence.

'I am so sorry, Sam.'

'She's still here with us. That is why Marty and I spend so much time outdoors. We can feel her presence in the wind and the leaves.'

'I suppose we have more in common than I could have imagined. The loss I felt when Mum went, well, I can sympathise with Marty, that's for sure. But he will be OK.'

'Yes. I hope Oscar loves his mum as much as you loved yours.'

We both sighed. The conversation had become heavy very rapidly.

'Did you hear about Mr Bentley?' Silver asked.

'No? What happened?'

'Well, after his first attempt he, understandably, took a year's leave. But just a month after he returned to teaching, he tried again. He succeeded, Archie. They say there wasn't the mental health facilities for him to be cared for. He was on an eight-month waiting list when he died.'

'Oh my, that's awful,' I said. 'He was alone, Silver. Everyone knew that. If only he had someone to encourage him to open up about his feelings. I suppose we are lucky to have such strong female presences in our lives.'

Silver nodded.

'Opie is the driving force for us Devauxs. She is stronger than I ever could be. Oscar's female appreciation is through the roof.'

‘And so, it should be.’

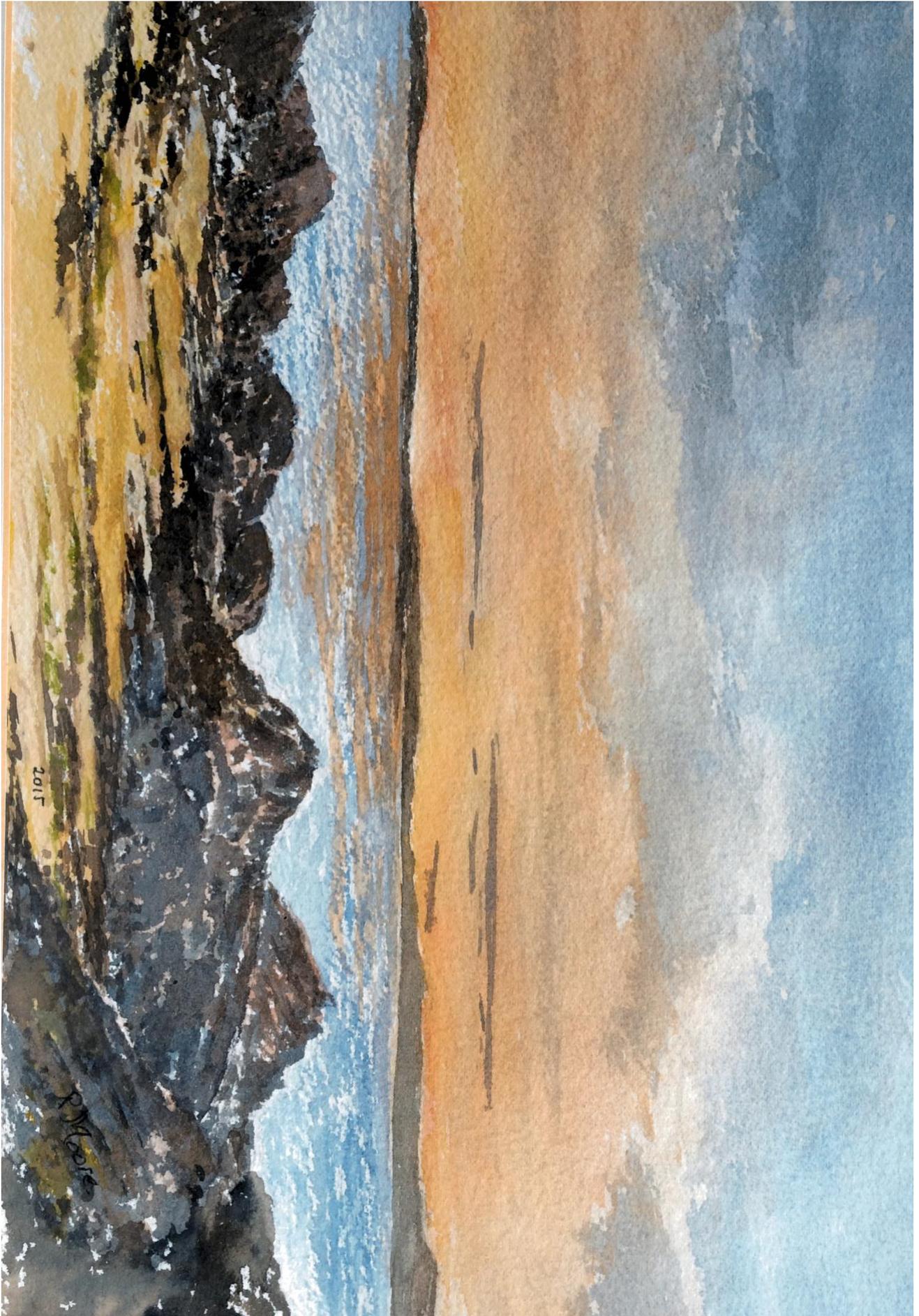
In my peripheral vision³⁵, I noticed Marty and Oscar plunging two huge kayaks into the water that they were now attempting to dive in to. I darted for the shoreline and scooped Oscar up so he could show off his flying squirrel impression from above the heads of Marty and Sam. After our little acrobatics show the four of us took our places in kayaks and set off for what would become an annual race across Lake Windemere.

Resting on the shoreline where the pebbles met the grass, we bathed in contentment from our exertions. I watched the water colour change to black as the day turned to dusk and the dewy smell of moorland heather crept in across the valley and the four of us lay on our tartan rug looking up at the glowing moon.

The End

Word count: 6,604

³⁵ What you can see that is outside your immediate gaze. So, the things around you that are slightly out of focus when you are looking at one particular object.



Critical Self Commentary

Watch the Water Colour is a piece of Children's fiction aimed at 10 to 12-year-olds. It addresses the issue of toxic masculinity and how this can be caused by bringing up boys believing they must fulfil an obligation to be what society deem to be 'real men'. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory experiment found that 'traits like competent, assertive, and ambitious were coded as masculine, and traits like caring and loving and generous were coded as feminine.'³⁶ I had Archie, Oscar, Silver, and Marty race across Lake Windermere in a friendly race. The dads weren't pushy, and the end goal was to have fun. This was to show that boys can compete against each other in a friendly way and without parents enforcing it upon them. Another way I tried to test the gender norms was through Archie's compassion for his friends and family. Archie and Silver speak plainly about possible results of bottling up emotions when they first meet by the lake. By them looking back on their childhood and speaking with perspective, I illuminate, to a young reader, what to be mindful of and the importance of learning from one's mistakes.

My initial plan for my Creative Writing Dissertation is far from the end of result. This significant change was due to numerous redrafts and intricate editing and re-writing throughout the entire process. My first port of call for my reading were the writers that influenced me as a child; for example, Jacqueline Wilson³⁷, Michael Morpurgo³⁸, and Roald Dahl³⁹. After re-reading their books that contained themes closely related to my own writing, such as divorce, I then ventured into books that are popular with today's 10 to 12-year-olds. My mother is a primary school teacher and I began by researching which books in her recommended reading

³⁶ Michael Kimmel and Lisa Wade, 'Ask a Feminist: Michael Kimmel and Lisa Wade Discuss Toxic Masculinity', in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* (U.S.: Academic Search Complete, 2018), p. 250.

³⁷ Jacqueline Wilson, *The Suitcase Kid* (London: Transworld Publishers, 1992).

³⁸ Michael Morpurgo, *Cool!* (London: HarperCollins, 2002).

³⁹ Roald Dahl, *The Twits* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

list for children within my targeted age range were relevant to the topics I hoped to explore. This included books by David Walliams⁴⁰, Jonathan Hancock⁴¹, and Marianne Levy⁴², to name a few.

I wanted more clarification from children today about the kind of books *they* read. So, I wrote a questionnaire and gave it to the children in years 4-6 at St. Peter's Roman Catholic Primary School in Rossendale. I then collated the results in Excel and analysed the trends. The three most interesting sets of results were the answers to the question 'What attracts you to a book?' (1 in appendix), 'What encourages you to continue to read a book?' (2 in appendix) and 'What discourages you from continuing to read a book?' (3 in appendix). Out of all the aspects of my research, this is one that has probably changed my writing the most. I also did not realise quite how much the aesthetic of a book can become the deciding factor for someone choosing to read it. The first graph shows that what most attracts a child to read a book is the front cover. This is one of the reasons that I went on to do further research on illustrations in children's literature, for example Thomas Leddy's *Aesthetics and Children's Picture-Books*⁴³.

Thomas Leddy argued that 'Some writers on children's picture-books seem to believe that comfort and reassurance are their most important goals.'⁴⁴ The use of illustrations in *Watch the Water Colour* provides a sense of comfort to those that are reading about trauma for the first time. It is difficult to strike a balance between not patronising the reader but also not demanding too much of them emotionally and intellectually. Consequently, including pictures in such a text allows for the reader to be challenged but also supported through their reading experience. Furthermore, if I were to publish the book, I would make sure to include a trigger

⁴⁰ David Walliams, *The Boy in the Dress* (London: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2009).

⁴¹ Jonathan Hancock, *How to... Be a Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴² Marianne Levy, *Ellie May Can Definitely be Trusted to Keep a Secret* (London: Jelly Pie, 2013).

⁴³ Thomas Leddy, *Aesthetics and Children's Picture-Books* (U.S: University of Illinois Press, 2002), <https://www.istor.org/stable/3301567> [Accessed: 26th April 2019].

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 43.

warning in the front, due to some of the themes within, like suicide, that could upset some readers.

Leddy also notes that ‘Adults and children simply prefer things closer to their respective interests.’⁴⁵ This is why I chose to write about divorce, loneliness, and grief. Although these are not typical topics within children’s literature, it is something that a huge number of children experience. The BBC noted that ‘There are around 1.7 million single parent families in the UK’⁴⁶. Child Bereavement UK state that ‘A parent of children under 18 dies every 22 minutes in the UK; around 23,600 a year. This equates to around 111 children being bereaved of a parent every day.’⁴⁷ That is a lot of children that are could potentially be experiencing loneliness, mental health issues, or grief, from an early age. I noticed that popular themes for children’s literature include spies, such as *Stormbreaker*⁴⁸, and fantasy, like *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*⁴⁹. There is a gap in the market for children’s literature about children that have had negative experiences in their lives, such as losing a family member.

‘Children’s literature is always written for both children and adults; to be published it needs to please at least some adults’⁵⁰. Therefore, I would argue, the point of contact and interest between what adults and children read demands accessibility for children and relatability for adults. *Watch the Water Colour* ticks both these boxes. The issues discussed are relatable to many adults and children. The language used is challenging for children, but also not patronising to adults. The use of footnotes, as inspired by Sharon Creech’s footnotes in

⁴⁵ Thomas Leddy, *Aesthetics and Children’s Picture-Books* (U.S: University of Illinois Press, 2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3301567> [Accessed: 26th April 2019], p. 44.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, *Working single parents ‘struggling to feed children’* (London: BBC, 2018) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43140285> [Accessed: 6th May 2019].

⁴⁷ Anonymous, *UK death & bereavement statistics* (U.K: Child Bereavement UK, 2018) <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/death-bereavement-statistics> [Accessed: 6th May 2019].

⁴⁸ Anthony Horowitz, *Stormbreaker* (London: Walker, 2000).

⁴⁹ Rick Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (London: Puffin, 2013).

⁵⁰ Beverly Lyon Clark, *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children’s Literature in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2003), p. 96.

*Heartbeat*⁵¹, refers indirectly to the use of footnotes in scholarly work, and uses this adult format to make the definitions of the more challenging terms used salient to younger readers. Furthermore, when published, the footnotes would be printed in a large font so that finding these words again is easy.

If given the opportunity to publish this book, I would ask to have it labelled as fiction, rather than children's literature. John Rowe Townsend argue that we should 'say that there is no such thing as children's literature' because 'children are not a separate form of life from other people,'⁵². For children, the literary landscape should be as open as possible for them to explore. By defining a particular book as 'children's literature' for one child may in fact deter them from reading that particular book. Therefore, it is the job of the author that wishes to write for children to create something inclusive and attractive to a diverse young audience. One of the ways in which this can succeed is through the subversive discourse that the child might not pick up when they are younger, but if they come back to the text as an adult, they might discover new levels of meaning, such as the metaphor of water I used throughout.

One of my ultimate goals in writing *Watch the Water Colour* was to challenge gender stereotypes that are often enforced in children's books. Marianne Levy's *Ellie May Can Definitely be Trusted to Keep a Secret*⁵³ portrays girls as being unintelligent and empty-headed. For example, Jeffrey asks Ellie, 'Why don't you sit and think fascinating thoughts?' and Ellie replies, 'I haven't got any fascinating thoughts'⁵⁴. Helen Greathead reinforces the stereotype that men are meant to work whilst women look after the family, in *Tough Jobs: Knights*. Greathead says, 'The girls aren't much older than you, but they are on the lookout for husbands already. Suddenly, they all seem to be smiling and gazing at you.'⁵⁵ This suggests women live

⁵¹ Sharon Creech, *Heartbeat* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004).

⁵² John Rowe Townsend, *A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), p. 196-97.

⁵³ Marianne Levy, *Ellie May Can Definitely be Trusted to Keep a Secret* (London: Jelly Pie, 2013).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Helen Greathead, *Tough Jobs: Knight* (London: A&C Black, 2007), p. 27.

to marry men, which is one of the reasons I presented Archie's Mum as a strong, single, working mother and Aunty Lana as an intellectually inspiring influence.

Archie has a close connection with his mother and aunty throughout the book. This is not questioned. This aim in centring my writing on a young boy having a strong female figure in his life was to empower women, particularly single mothers, who might be reading the book to their child. Furthermore, CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) states that '75% of UK suicides are male'⁵⁶. In an article titled *Boys Do Cry*, for CALMzine (CALM's magazine) Edson Lovatto wrote, 'Young boys see a celebration of being angry and angry alpha males in the media. This hyper-masculinity is celebrated – it's all about impressing not expressing.'⁵⁷ Archie cries when his mother dies and he talks about it. He is exposed to suicide as a child and due to his female caregivers teaching him to be honest about his feelings, he discusses suicide with Silver. Together they recognise that if only Mr Bentley 'had someone to encourage him to open up about his feelings'⁵⁸, his death might have been prevented. I engage with the discussion about suicide, as CALM encourage, to help change the way mental health is perceived, from as early as childhood.

There are groups such as The Good Men project, which is an 'initiative that aims to challenge public perception of what it means to be a man in the 21st Century'⁵⁹, according to Sabrina Barr. Tom Ross-Williams, ambassador of The Good Men project, said toxic masculinity 'affects anybody outside of a very narrow "man box"⁶⁰. It seems Shepherd Bliss coined the term 'Toxic Masculinity' in his essay 'Revisioning Masculinity: A report on the

⁵⁶ Anonymous, *Record awareness of male suicide, as latest stats show 3 in 4 UK suicides are men* (UK: CALM, 2016) <https://www.thecalmzone.net/2016/12/record-awareness-of-male-suicide-as-latest-stats-show-3-in-4-uk-suicides-are-men/> [Accessed: 7th May 2019].

⁵⁷ Edson Lovatto, *Boys Do Cry* (London: CALMzine, 2016) https://issuu.com/reset-magazine/docs/issue24_final_-_all_single_pages [Accessed: 7th May 2019], p. 18.

⁵⁸ Bethany Bacon, *Watch the Water Colour*, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Sabrina Barr, *What is toxic masculinity and how can it be addressed?* (London: The Guardian, 2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/toxic-masculinity-definition-what-is-boys-men-gillette-ad-behaviour-attitude-girls-women-a8729336.html> [Accessed: 27th April 2019].

⁶⁰ Ibid.

growing men's movement', first published in 1987. Bliss writes about how causes of change to typical masculinity are partly down to female empowerment. For example, 'Women have demanded more access to traditionally male jobs, thus threatening the "breadwinner" image of men.'⁶¹ This is one of the images I hoped to portray in my book; Archie's mother brings the only income into his family but nothing seems amiss about this, Archie in fact regards his mother very highly because of her strong work ethic. Furthermore, when Sam is reintroduced into the story at the end, we see another single parent, but this time it is a father who has had to raise his son alone. This narrative choice was made to illustrate the interchangeability of parental roles.

As the editorial process progressed, I realised the importance of speaking openly and honestly with children. Therefore, I chose to move away from my original ideas of writing about fantastical tales on a plane and instead explored death, divorce, and the ways toxic masculinity can manifest and be avoided. The significance of Archie's dad dying illustrates the way one can be made stronger by negative and uncontrollable circumstances. Furthermore, Archie proves that he could be the caring father figure that he never had. Mr Bentley's depression and eventual death demonstrates the possible outcomes of mental health left untreated. Archie and Silver's recognition of the loneliness and lack of support that caused Mr Bentley's death displays the healing nature of talking and the importance of men being able to express their feelings and not have to live up to any male stereotype. Finally, life is shown to be fragile throughout *Watch the Water Colour*. Therefore, I hope the positive quality to take away from reading this book is to treasure every moment, particularly when in the company of family and friends.

Word count: 2,181

⁶¹ Shepherd Bliss, *Revisioning Masculinity: A report on the growing men's movement* (Context Institute: 2019), <https://www.context.org/iclib/ic16/bliss/> [Accessed: 27th April 2019].

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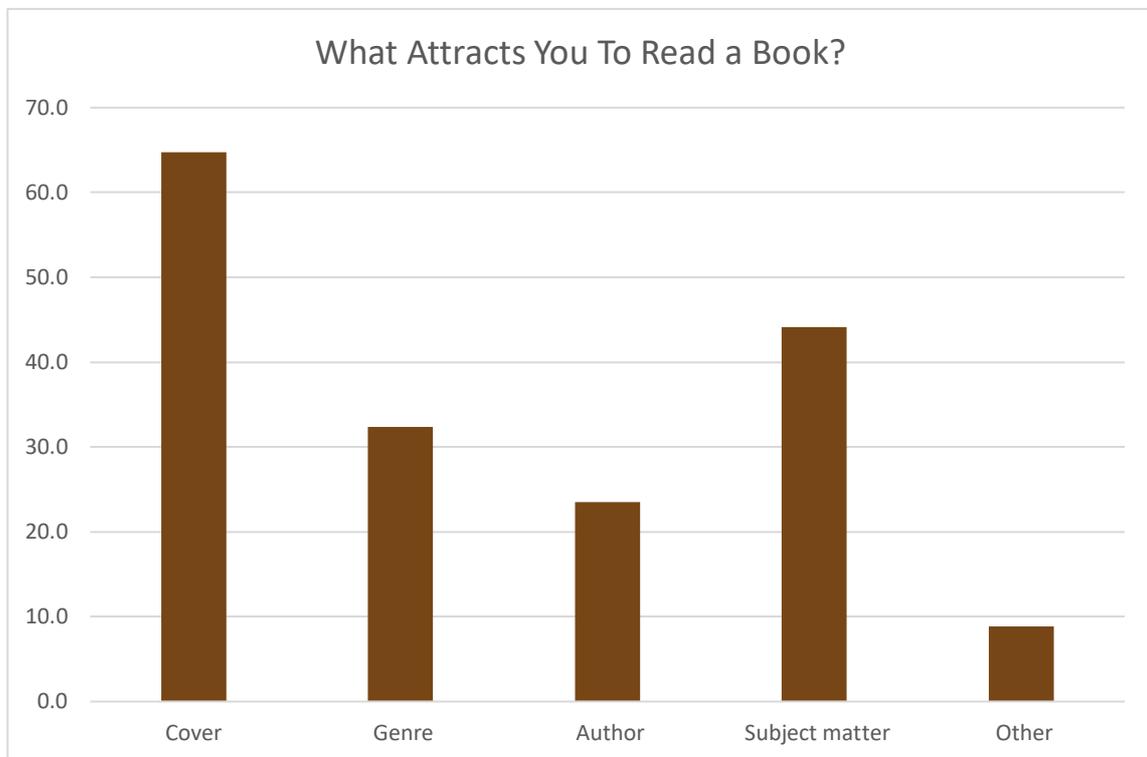
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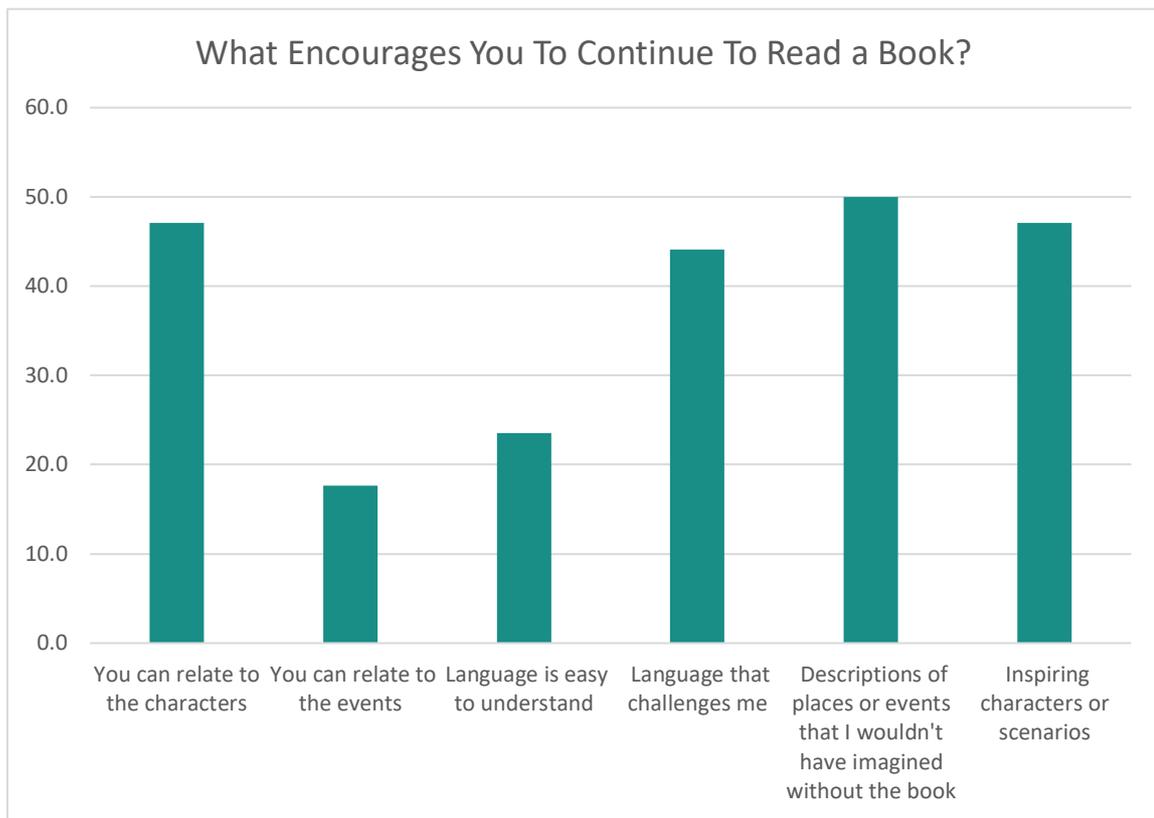
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Appendix

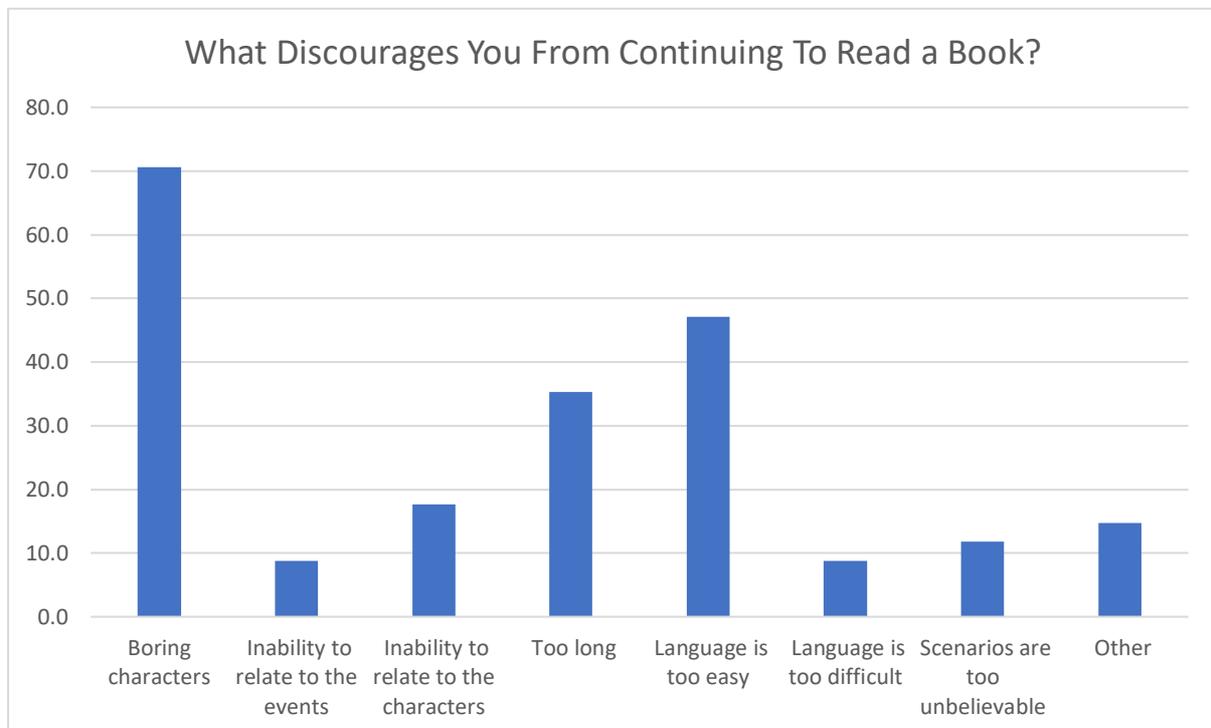
1.



2.



3.



Glossary (within appendix)

Inebriate to make someone drunk.

Intoxicate to lose control of oneself due to alcohol or drugs.

Lavish something that is fancy.

Libation a drink.

Lofty elevated and ornate.

Vernacular the kind of language used, often in specific regions of a country or for a particular reason, for example to persuade someone to do something.

Legion a big number of something.

Digressions the departure from the centre topic of discussion.

Pyrotechnics an amazing performance.

Forty Forty Home a game that I highly recommend you look up how to play. Often also called 123 Home.

Phantom memories types of memories that are often related to something that did in fact take place, but these memories have been warped over time because they have been thought about frequently. Often the memory of the event that one recalls becomes something very different from the original moment that occurred.

Furore sudden outbreak of anger or shock.

Linger stay in a place due to a reluctance to leave.

Discrimination unjust judgement of a person, often based on something that they cannot control, for example, gender, age, race, or sexuality.

Sexism discrimination based on someone's gender.

Olympus OM-2 a camera from the 1970s.

Compensation to make amends.

Crescendo gradually become louder or more intense.

Sermon a speech made during church services often inspired by a passage in the Bible.

Proficiently in a skilled or competent manner.

Emperor Palpatine the main antagonist from the *Star Wars* franchise.

Young Skywalker the main protagonist from the *Star Wars* franchise.

Hooligans someone who is rowdy and/or causes trouble.

Merchandise goods that are bought and sold.

Fortifications a strong, tall wall to defend an army or population against attack.

Diplomacy dealing with people sensitively and with tact.

Conscientious aware of others and considerate about doing one's best.

Philtrum the section of tunnelling skin running from between the bottom of the nostrils down to the top of the upper lip.

Corduroys a velvet-like material with ridges, in this case fashioned into a pair of trousers.

Finches a small bird that has an array of variants, mainly found in Britain.

Scripted scripts are used in theatre, television, and film. To say that someone is speaking as if they are 'scripted' suggests they are speaking words someone else has told them to speak.

Stagnate become inactive. Often referred to as a body of water without a flow. This is often where disease breeds and so 'stagnant' works as a metaphor to describe the way things, when left untouched, can begin to fester and become a bigger problem.

Rite of passage an important part of someone's life that marks change. For example, something that causes someone to move from being a child to an adult.

Matriarchal a powerful woman who is the head of a family or group of people.

Peripheral vision what you can see that is outside your immediate gaze. So, the things around you that are slightly out of focus when you are looking at one particular object.