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Heaven and Hell at the Paradise Motel [1]

Tessa Chudy

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Abstract: This piece is taken from the novel "Heaven and Hell at the Paradise Motel" and the exegesis that together forms my PhD thesis. The three main strands of this thesis are Gothic, Noir and sense of place. The novel, ''Heaven and Hell at the Paradise Motel", is preoccupied with the natural environment, its subtle seasonal changes and the way the environment impacts on its human inhabitants and how they in turn affect it. The novel is, in a very Gothic sense, haunted by dreams, apparitions and narratives – specifically mini-narratives that reflect the nature of fairy tales, horror stories and urban myths. It contains elements of melodrama, horror, romance. The story follows a deeply dysfunctional family through a seasonal cycle: beginning in Spring and ending once again in Spring. A key focus for both the creative and the theoretical work was the everyday application of the Gothic and Noir – for example a house doesn't have to be a castle to be haunted; people don't have to be monsters to be monstrous. The dark, the strange, the sinister and the perverse lurk in the shadows of everyday reality, but also how these elements intertwined within the landscape.

Introduction

The novel that the following extract is taken from "Heaven and Hell at the Paradise Motel" is a Gothic Noir work which grew out of a distinct place and sense of that place. I found myself writing from a powerful feeling of loss and displacement, writing a landscape that I had grown up with and perhaps most crucially – in. But I was writing from an urban setting and I was no longer 'in' that landscape (the sound of running water had been replaced by the steady stream of passing traffic) however that landscape still remained an important force within me and the novel. This sense of displacement and disassociation from the natural environment served to raise questions about the influence of the landscape on its inhabitants. The subtle changes and the dramatic changes within the landscape all create an impact, a mood, perhaps even a state of mind akin to an affect of the landscape where the landscape emotionally and psychologically acts on those who come in contact with it.

[1] This paper is a contribution to the *Placescape, placemaking, placemarking, placedness … geography and cultural production* Special Issue of *Coolabah*, edited by Bill Boyd & Ray Norman. The Special Issue is supported by two websites: http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au and http://coolabahplacedness-images.blogspot.com.au/.

For the purposes of my thesis, I settled on the definition of the Gothic as something that constitutes a kind of dark zone that exists beyond the structures of normality and as such it is marked by its excesses. The Gothic is filled with too much of everything – fear, violence, sexuality, monstrosity; it is playful and particularly fluid; it is also fearful (although even this fearfulness is strangely playful, toying with the desire to be frightened, to be horrified).

The Gothic has crossed both generic and national boundaries. The Gothic is as much at home in contemporary Australia as it was in colonial Australia, in early and contemporary America, and in just about any landscape you can name the Gothic can easily adapt − from frozen sublime to hot deserts, to simple suburban streets. Because of my interest in exploring the landscape I knew, my work was informed both by the broader Australian landscape as well as the subtropical one I was writing from and by the fictional Gothic landscape. The concept and construction of the Gothic landscape emerges as a powerful theme in both the creative work and the exegesis.

Noir is perhaps most essentially a way of seeing: it is a dark vision. It is bound not by time or medium or genre or national borders. Noir is a complex and mutable construct that explores the very nature of the truth and the viewing of that truth. It is not bound by time or medium or genre or national borders.

I attempted to tap into the psychological mood of Noir, the tone, state of mind, and the complex relationship with place and truth, minus the conventional detective/crime story with particular emphasis on the regional Australian context of both the story and its Noir elements.

The use of the landscape implies the natural and the human-made landscape – but also the broader implications and applications of genre, and, specifically, the historical construction of the Australian landscape as harsh and inhospitable by colonial settlers. I do not deal with the more extreme landscape of the interior or the outback or explore the landscape as alien and inhospitable as did many of the colonial Gothic writers − such as Barbara Baynton in *Bush Studies* (1902) and Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874). Later writers like Kenneth Cook in *Wake in Fright* (1961) and Patrick White in *Voss* (1957) explored similar perceptions of the landscape. The landscape that I write is the subtropical zone, not on the coast, but near to it – part of the coastal strip, but not actually coastal, a landlocked, hilly area; it is an area of subtle extremes, strange, creeping beauty and the destructive omnipresent traces of settlement – soil erosion, noxious weeds, pollution etc.

Having lived a large part of my life within the natural/rural landscape, I had become attuned to the way that the landscape changes – in different weather, light, seasons etc. The changes in appearance of the landscape can be subtle or, as after a bushfire, they can be dramatic. However, they are all relevant to my project, part of which has been to explore the impact of the landscape on the people who inhabit it. People can change a landscape but a landscape can also change people. People can chop down trees and change the surface of the landscape, while the landscape, through the sound (or sight) of running water or falling branches, can create feelings of calm or unease, and these feelings can become pervasive and overwhelming over time.

Genre and the landscape have a fraught relationship, I found myself increasingly frustrated by eco-criticism's seeming reluctance to engage with the landscape within generic fiction, and its insistence on poetry as the true medium for exploring the environment. Richard Kerridge (1998:5) notes that 'eccocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis'. This is difficult to apply to writing that deals not with the radical face of environmental trauma, but, rather, its subtle repercussions, that become evident only over time spent in place. I found my research repeatedly grinding to a halt in the face of eco-critical impenetrability. Laurence Buell (2005) devised a series of guidelines for how to classify an environmental text. The first of these was:
that the nonhuman environment must be envisaged not merely as a framing device, but as an active presence, suggesting human history's implication in natural history. (Buell 2005: 25)

Taking Buell's outline as a guide I shifted my focus to the concept of the Gothic landscape as a potent and potentially sublime but also elusive force, and to its construction within the subtropical Australian landscape. I decided to attempt to explore the landscape expressively as a powerful force that acts on and is acted upon by its inhabitants.

Extract

Spring

Hell

Heaven is an illusion, a vague romantic ideal, straight off the cover of *Watchtower Magazine* or those illustrated children's Bibles that made you think happy endings just required a little faith, before you were old enough to know better. In truth you can never quite be sure, like that exact spot where the rainbow ends. Maybe it exists. Then again maybe it doesn't.

Hell though. Hell is real. Not the red flaming place they tell you about, populated by ugly demons with pitchforks. No, it's compact, portable. A heavy, corrosive, inescapable, darkness – black, not red − that we all carry around inside that is as much a part of us as our fingerprints. Maybe even more so.

Just as one, tragically, does not get to choose one's name, one does not – and cannot − choose one's relatives: nor does one always get to choose one's own private, personal hell. So my name is not nobody. I would prefer no family to the one that I have. And I know that hell exists. Some days I feel it stirring deep inside me. Hell may be the most real thing in this world.

Most days I find it hard enough just living with myself, let alone my family, and hell. If I were American I would be mistaken for one of those murdering terrorist types. All the time so quiet, reserved and unassuming on the surface, while underneath they are

someone else altogether – their hell boiling quietly, biding its time before erupting violently. I'm someone else too – trouble is I don't have a clue who or what I really am underneath.

At times I do harbor thoughts of anarchy and mass murder, but my problem is different again. I carry a curse, a terrible, unnamed, undefined curse. I inherited the curse from my parents; they got it from The Paradise. Part of the curse is the dreams about death, another part that these dreams always come true. Then there are the spirits that are real and visible, and The Paradise is full of spirits. Then there is the terrible weight that I carry around with me, a kind of excessive awareness of gravity, but that too is only part of the curse. It doesn't really matter though, I suppose, when you get down to it – nothing does. I have my part and I play it – when the curse doesn't weigh too heavily on me.

I don't quite know how my relatives really feel about me, but, I am necessary – a scapegoat – the one who carries the curse for them. The curse is never spoken about. Not even by me. It is ignored in the hope that it will just go away. But it never goes anywhere.

***

One heartless spring morning with new life barely distinguishable from new death the harsh sunlight sucking the colour and life from the growth spurt that had flushed the hillside green, a breath of air half-heartedly ruffled my dusty lace curtains. I was twenty-seven and a bit, my life was going, as it had always been, nowhere. And I had what could have been a revelation, even though it was not accompanied by a blinding flash of light, or a general shaking of the earth. I was going to do something. I wasn't going to die under this curse. I didn't know what I was going to do, when, or how. But I knew I'd do it or die trying. It'd take some time, I knew that. But I'd figure it out.

It wasn't then that I decided to write. But it wasn't long after. Three days later to be precise. I got out of bed at two in the morning and began to tear my room apart – the contents of drawers went flying – until I found an empty exercise book and a pen (both turned up under the bed, not that I could remember ever putting them there). I didn't want to write − I had to. I had to get the words swirling around inside my head out onto a page.

I got back into bed and started to write – nothing in particular, just whatever chose to come out on the page. But I discovered something wonderful – while I was writing I didn't feel the awful weight of being myself.

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This place gets to everyone eventually. Not so much The Paradise which has a bitter, slow-acting poison all its own, but the place itself – the landscape, for want of a better

word – which lives and breathes and seeps into the bloodstream. It's like a little self-contained pocket, separated from everywhere else and hemmed in by a fluid line of blue-green hills − the landscape is a succession of hills. Bigger hills slip almost imperceptibly into smaller hills which in turn slope down into steep-sided gullies and the winding, occasionally intersecting lines of the road and the creek, which flows lazy and cold, from its not-too-distant source.

The Paradise is surrounded by bladey grass. I have always loved bladey grass, the way it whispers and shivers on the faintest breeze, the way it changes colour with the season from green to brown, even its ability to draw blood. There is nothing really remarkable about bladey grass to look at it, clumps of long sharply pointed leaves with razor edges.

Beyond the bladey grass are the carpet grasses which trap the unsuspecting in a tightly interwoven tangle. The carpet grasses come up to dense seed which sticks to anything that passes through it. They quiver in the breeze and change colour with the season, but lack the fascination, the seductive charm of the bladey grass. In the patches not totally consumed by the carpet grasses, fireweed pokes its way to the surface, with its bright yellow, toxic but happy-looking flowers.

It isn't so much the isolation, because town is only half an hour away, but this is a different world to the world in town. And it isn't so much the physicality of the landscape which is subtle, rather than dramatic. It is truly beautiful, though in a wounded, wasted, timeless way, with its ever-changing sameness that burns in through susceptible eyeballs to leave indelible scars on the consciousness. No, it's something else that I've long since given up trying to define. It is. And it must be. The only way to live with it is to accept it, and to surrender – completely.

This is a place of subtle extremes. The landscape shifts from tamed to wild. In a wet year everything is green; in a dry year everything is brown; and some years it is both, moving fluidly from one to the other – soft to hard, living to dead. Technically, I think we are in the subtropics, or where the subtropics meet the temperate zone. When it's hot it's very hot, humid and exhausting. Now it rains in summer, but I remember when summers were dry for days and weeks and months. When it's cold, it's very cold, or at least it seems very cold. The rest of the time it is in-between. Perhaps The Paradise truly exists in a half world of in-between. Perhaps it has always been like this or perhaps The Paradise generates its own climate – filled with humidity and discontent.

The land around The Paradise hill is cleared, but unused, preyed upon by weeds and haunted by wallabies and foxes. There is the odd scrawny cow belonging to one or other of the locals, but the land isn't rich enough to support many cows, scrawny or otherwise. The few cows it does support wander around indifferent to the subtleties of fences and property boundaries. Deeper into the hills, deer run wild, and dingoes howl in the darkness of long primal nights, on hillsides strangely close to the moon.

The locals are few and far between. I never managed to figure out if they don't say much generally or just don't say much to us on principle.

Across the road is the tin shed where Water and his parents lived. Back along the road is a little house that is empty now and falling down, or more exactly sinking into the

ground. Away over the other side of the creek, some old local families live with their scrawny cows, brown horses and dusty utes, but they keep away from us and we keep away from them.

The Paradise, though, is another story. Closer to the coast it was a hotel in its previous incarnation (admittedly, it is supposed to be one still, but, once upon a time it actually functioned and, hard as it is to believe, had paying guests). It's an old, ugly, sprawling, depressing mess. But it is home.

Grandfather got it cheap. Or maybe he just got it – when I say got, I mean just that, because one day he didn't have it and the next day he did.

The same thing with the land. Grandfather was always acquiring things – places, people, and objects like the books in the library he never read, or the four pale, shimmering landscapes by a semi-famous local artist, that one day appeared on the walls. Most things he acquired disappeared over time, except for The Paradise, and the family.

He had The Paradise bought here in fragments. It was reassembled, on the top of this rocky hill, curving, along the crest of the hill. Bare to the four winds – with a view to die for, the hills seem to stretch out around The Paradise, fading into the distance, blue, green, beautiful and impossibly solid. He was convinced – by exactly what remains unknown – that this would be an ideal tourist retreat. So he sat on his balcony and waited. But he forgot that tourists need enticing; they need to be hit over the head with reasons to visit a place. More than twenty years later he was still waiting.

No one ever came. Nobody other than us and the locals has any idea that it even exists now, and most of the locals give it a wide berth. The sign fell down a month after it went up. It's still there, lying on the ground, rusty and overgrown with weeds – a tangle of grasses, thistles and morning glory. Only just readable – Welcome to The Paradise. It's still in the white pages under Paradise H 6565 6565.

It's Paradise alright, but with a twist, and a hollow, dark heart. If it weren't for the fact that my family lived here, it could be perfect.

I was five when I came here and I can't imagine living anywhere else, my family notwithstanding. I remember we used to live near the beach before The Paradise, but, for me, the constant washing of the ocean could never compare to the haunted beauty of these hills that seem to hold up the sky, and the whispering of the bladey grass.

Like The Paradise, we came here in fragments, installments. Grandfather had us bought here in pieces, but, unlike The Paradise, he never bothered to put us together properly.

I seem to be the only one who loves the bladey grass that surrounds The Paradise like a body of water. Grandfather declared war on it after he arrived. He would attack it with a whippersnipper and poison, but it always came back, whispering knowingly. In the end Grandfather retreated to his balcony, glaring at the sea of grass shimmering down the hillside, leaving the war against it to Uncle Wes and his bladeless ride-on mower. He

went out every day to mow the bladey grass that grew taller than a man in places. But his mowing never had any effect.

The Paradise has a flat roof and three floors. Inside it is a dimly lit maze of twisted hallways and too many stairs. The walls are all a strange greyish colour. There are twenty-four bedrooms in The Paradise, each with ensuites, stovetops and un-stocked bar fridges, a front desk, a proper kitchen (that everyone uses though not usually at the same time; family meals are reserved for Christmas, New Year and the occasional birthday), a pantry, a bar, two dining rooms (one somewhat more pretentious than the other which is called the formal dining room and has never, as far as I can remember, been used), one lounge, four storage rooms, an extra bathroom (for when all the on suites are busy), a library and one room that apparently has no purpose at all.

Looking at it from the outside The Paradise appears to be crouching on the hillside, like a dinosaur waiting for the inevitable arrival of extinction, with its tragic little balconies hanging off the bedrooms, grubby windows like so many sightless eyes, and peeling, once-green paint, revealing streaks of faded timber. Wild ferns and clumps of grass have sprung up in the gutters, as if nature were attempting to re-establish itself.

Think of all those desperate jokes about families, and you would just about have my family, only worse. Over time they have converged and congealed into place. All in all there are about fifteen of us living here – my grandparents; Uncle Wes and his wife Jane; Uncle Nick, whose daughter died and whose wife left, and who now never speaks; Aunts Vicki, Imogen, and Sarah; my four female cousins – the alphabet – Abi (Vicki's daughter), Beck (Wes and Jane's daughter), Crystal (Imogen's daughter) and Dee (also Vicki's daughter); myself; and Spidey (Sarah's son, a five-year-old reincarnation of Spiderman).

Grandfather started life with a plan. No one knows exactly what this plan was, mainly because he didn't believe in sharing things like that. But I think that I have figured it out. Grandfather's plan was to build an empire, with himself at the head, and everything and everyone in the empire under his control. I don't think it really mattered to Grandfather what sort of empire he started or why he thought The Paradise would be a part of it. The main part was doing it, having it and being in charge of it even if it didn't mean anything. Before The Paradise Grandfather did something else, but I don't remember what − I was just a baby before The Paradise.

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Once upon a time my Grandfather was the kind of man you wouldn't look sideways at. He was a man who got things his own way − what they call a self-made man, everything he had he got himself, and, I suppose in many ways he was successful for quite a while. Although, in truth I never actually figured out what is was that Grandfather did when he was a successful, self-made man. He was always busy doing 'something' serious and consuming, but now he just waits for the tourists. Over time he has faded to the point that he takes no notice of anyone and they take even less of him, all he has now is The Paradise and the family, both of which have been crumbling

around him for as long as I can remember. He wanders around in his own little world and what he says or does has little or no bearing on anyone else any more.

Gran would look at him, shake her head and wonder what she ever saw in him. She never left him, but I think from time to time she wished she had. Gran spends all her time cleaning and polishing the floor. I think perhaps it's her way of blocking out the way her life has turned out − the disappointments and disillusionment don't seem so important when you are doing something else that takes all your time and energy.

My parents jumped off the roof of The Paradise once; they never told me why. I think they just wanted to get away from the echoes and the ghosts that swirl around inside The Paradise and invade the quiet spaces in any head they can get into. But that didn't kill them. A drunk driver did that when I was twelve.

They still talk to me. So I know I'm not alone and in a way they never did leave me. I just wish that once in a while they'd tell me something useful instead of going on about clouds and spider webs. Not that I have anything against clouds or spider webs, but, when you're trying to make sense of things, they aren't exactly what you want to hear about.

When my parents jumped off the roof they said that they expected to die – my father cracked his skull, which is where all the blood came from – but when they didn't die they said it was like getting a second chance at life. Every breath they took became precious. So when they did die in the accident, they weren't ready for death. Their bodies were gone but a part of them remained, here at The Paradise.

The Garden of Unearthly Delights

The Paradise was supposed to have a swimming pool. The hole was dug but the pool never arrived. The Paradise was also supposed to have a garden, a leisure garden that meandered casually around The Paradise. The garden that over time became ironically referred to as the Pleasure Garden is still there in fits and starts. The beds and paths are overgrown and the most delicate plants rapidly succumbed to the harsh conditions on the top of the hill – the dry, hard soil, the heat and the cold. However, here and there the odd plant has taken root despite the odds and clung doggedly to life, like the gardenia and the candy-striped rose, clumps of natives − pink-tipped lillipillis, wirey bottle-brushes, unassuming wattles that explode into dense yellow bloom, and rampant native violets.

As it was Grandfather's garden, no one else was allowed to work on it. The garden was supposed to stretch right around The Paradise, but only the back half was ever finished. A rotting wooden bench almost hidden by bladey grass sits contemplating the scrub-filled hole that was to have been the swimming pool. When the hole was first dug, Dee had jumped down into it and thrown handfuls of dirt into the air, laughing. Back then her laughter was pure and unaffected. It has been a long time since I have heard her laughing for the sake of it, for joy and not for pain. Dee lost a lot in the transition process of growing up, but I think we all did. And it wasn't trivial stuff. It was stuff that

really mattered like hope and those other good, important things that help you function without dying a little inside every day.

For a while, Grandfather used to lurk in his garden, contemplating things – usually the empty swimming pool – with a floppy straw hat on his head. But then the novelty seemed to wear off and he retreated to his balcony. Gran thought aloud from time to time that she might take up gardening as a hobby, but she always seemed too busy scrubbing and polishing the floor. The birds and snakes and lizards and occasionally a hyper-vigilant wallaby haunted the garden, and if anyone got any pleasure out of the garden it was them.

Bloody Fingers

Bladey grass grows all over The Paradise hill, where it grows the individual plants spread to form patches where nothing else can grow, in the gullies and down the sides of the surrounding hills are these patches of bladey grass. Some of the areas are quite small – just a few feet, others are much larger. Long quivering clumps of slender, seductive leaves. There are areas of carpet grass, but overall the bladey grass rules. It is, I know, a weed. But, somehow, I find it very beautiful.

Bladey grass reflects the changes of the seasons, as it changes colour – from bright green, to dark green, to gold and finally brown – is beautiful. I even find its sharp teeth, the razor like silica threads, beautiful. Bladey grass looks after itself. It is a wise plant, a dangerous plant, but in some way it is also a very useful plant.

Bladey grass is so strong that in New Guinea they make roofs out of it. Other places people make paper and fabric from its fibers. Where bladey grass grows the erosion that washes out so much of the sides of these hills, stripping them of their natural vegetation – seems to stop. The Chinese use bladey grass in medicine. It is an astringent and a tonic. But we don't use bladey grass for anything. It surrounds us like a quivering sharp-toothed sea, it whispers seductively and moves almost liquid in its own breezes. But no one here gets it, not even the locals.

The one real weakness of bladey grass is that it is extremely flammable. A tiny spark and a whole hillside of bladey grass can explode, and if one hillside goes, then the next one goes, and the next and the next until there isn't anything left, but it always grows back. Vibrantly green against the blackened surface.

Try to kill bladey grass, and it won't die. Learn to live with it, and, the world becomes a better, more beautiful, place where a misplaced finger is quickly bloodied.

Conclusion

Genre, in the form of the Gothic and Noir formed an important part of my writing, but place, its construction and an understanding of it as a living breathing entity is possibly

the most important factor in the story. I wanted to re-create in my writing what it felt like to be 'in' the landscape I was writing about, to be surrounded by it, immersed in it.

Perhaps the closest description of what I am trying to achieve is Lucy Lippard (1997:33): 'Every landscape is a hermetic narrative ... The story is composed of mythologies, histories, ideologies – the stuff of identity and representation'. It is this sense of the landscape as ongoing, self-contained narrative that I am trying to tap into.

A Gothic or Noir landscape is the projection of human concepts, fears and desires onto it. Can the landscape be considered a counterpoint or complicit character in the processes of Gothic-ization or Noir-ization? Ross Gibson (2002: 50) notes that history is real in a landscape; 'history lives as a presence in the landscape ... this history is facts made by people into stories, rendering events as interpretations, reasons and predictions'. I suspect that the landscape absorbs the history and stories that are laid over it, and, in much the same way, genre and its archetypes and narratives are absorbed into the landscape.

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Tessa Chudy is currently completing a PHD in creative writing at Southern Cross University. I am especially interested in the intersection of gothic and noir and the role of the landscape in fiction and the idea of creating an internal reality in my work. I am also a visual artist and have lived on the mid north coast of NSW all my life. My artwork can be viewed at http://www.redbubble.com/people/curly9/art. (Email: frenzy81@tpg.com.au)