

## The University of Melbourne

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### Little Bliss

Abstract:

The story of Jake and his ‘Little Bliss’ (little sis) explores the tensions in an adult sibling relationship when Jake returns home after years of working overseas. Within this text, there is an emphasis on the reading experience, via the inclusion of footnotes that set up Jake’s dual, covert narrative. In *Story and discourse*, Seymour Chatman proposes that ‘the implied author’ is able to establish ‘a secret communication with the implied reader’ (1978, 233), offering a definition of unreliable narration that includes an implied author who operates as an implicit signaller of dissonance in the text. In *Little Bliss*, the narrator Jake, in offering ‘whispered asides’ and ‘self-edits’ to the reader, as well as corrective interpretations of events, functions as an ersatz implied author, becoming in effect his own signaller of dissonance in text, unexpectedly rendering his narration as ‘reliable’.

Biographical note:

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Creative writing – unreliable narration – implied author – footnoting – siblings

‘A beige feature wall. Really?’

She frowns at me, puts her hand to her throat, blinks, turns back to her wall.<sup>1</sup> I can see she’s working out how to play this, pretend it’s an in joke, yes, yes of course, it’s so daft isn’t it – imagine if I’d chosen taupe instead, too funny. But pfft – that moment’s gone Little Bliss,<sup>2</sup> it’s too late to pretend it. I keep at her, ‘So, exactly how is beige a feature? Are you being ironic?’

‘Umm, umm, but well, it’s a tawny beige, with a gold undertone in it. I was thinking fawn but that would have been too much somehow, too something, too...’

‘Obvious?’

We lock looks after I let this one out. She’s all petulance now, crossing her bare arms tight against her chest. In her sleeveless white dress, accessorised with a cross, pursed mouth she looks like she’s posing for an end of year footy photo line-up.

‘So tell me, why would I take colour advice from a man who only ever wears black?’<sup>3</sup>

She makes a hurrumph of triumph,<sup>4</sup> turns on her heel and zigzags around the cream couches to her kitchen, gone before I can scald her with any more snippy words. Then bang, I’m startled by the thumping gritty whiz of the coffee bean grinder. Without her in it, I make a survey of the room. It is a swathe of beige. Christ, even the pot plants are leached of colour.<sup>5</sup> By the time she returns with flat whites and biscuits, I’ve seated myself on a couch that’s long enough for an airport terminus. I pat the armrest and say, ‘And what do you call this colour?’

‘Nacre.’

‘What the hell is nacre?’

‘It’s the sheen on a pearl.’

‘Rightio... Good coffee Bliss. Right shade of brown.’

‘Sorry?’

‘It blends beautifully with the tiramisu rug thing you’ve got going on.’

‘Just drink it.’

She sips. I gulp. I’m waiting for her to fill the silence, to talk it all up like she always does, but she just sits and sips, gazing out on to her back garden, and I keep mum,<sup>6</sup> enveloping myself in the couch’s creamy quietness.

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<sup>1</sup> My little blister.

<sup>2</sup> Real name Bess.

<sup>3</sup> She did add to this: ‘Get the phone would you? Johnny Cash called and he wants his look back,’ but I thought that was a bit harsh, so I left it out.

<sup>4</sup> It was more like a horse braying, but hurrumph of triumph catches her elegance better.

<sup>5</sup> Rethink Christmas present: find hot pink throw.

<sup>6</sup> Shhh.

She starts up, ‘All my friends like my feature wall. Just because you don’t, doesn’t make it wrong.’

‘Maybe they were just being polite.’

‘Maybe you should try polite.’

‘Have, the shoes were too tight. They make me cranky.’

‘Right. I’m done with this.’ She stands up. ‘Finished your coffee then?’

‘Yep. I’ll have anotherie, cheers,’ as I hand her my cup and saucer.

‘No, I think it’s well time you left.’

‘What? Wait. But you invited me here for dinner.’

And I’m thinking that all I’ve got at home is about five weet-bix, no milk or sugar and if I don’t get nosh here I won’t be eating much because it’s three days to pay day and I’ve got exactly 4.85 in my wallet.

‘I don’t want to cook for you, be all judged by you. Go home to your porridge or whatever you do when you’re skint. Why do you think I invited you on the 28th? I knew you wouldn’t come if you were flush.’ I stay quiet. She’s busy plumping the hell out of a cushion when she says, ‘Well Jake, you can stay if you beg. Go on. Can you smell the roast yet, the pork belly, potatoes, the pumpkin? And there’s a raspberry tart in the fridge.’<sup>7</sup>

Buffoon husband is at the head of the table, slugging back the red, and the rugrats are yelling for him to look, look, look at me daddy, and the littlest is bawling for his orange juice that the middle one knocked over into his peas. Buffoon<sup>8</sup> is jabbing his finger in my face announcing that, ‘Bloody academics – those what can’t do, teach.

Get yourself a real job downtown and then you’ll know what working is.’

And that’s when I bite his finger.<sup>9</sup> I reckon he’s going to punch me. I feign calm and return to the roasted carrots, slicing them into half-inch rounds, smothering them in gravy and getting them into my mouth fast, got to get that taste of his salty finger off my tongue.<sup>10</sup>

Bliss is up, clapping the kids out of the kitchen. ‘C’mon, I want all of you on the lounge, now. Kids, settle down. What book do you want Jake to read?’

‘The Windies Willows one,’ says the littlest, with his arm still curled around her knee.

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<sup>7</sup> I did beg here but I don’t want to talk about it.

<sup>8</sup> Waldoon, Jake. ‘Long-running pejorative nicknames given to brothers-in-law and their damaging effect on sibling relationships.’ *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*. (Winter 2007) 26:21-29.

<sup>9</sup> Did I really do this?

<sup>10</sup> No I didn’t, it was pork crackling, not his chubby digit ... but a bit of biffa would’ve been just the ticket.

‘*Wind in the Willows?*’ She hesitates, bends a little and pulls out *Where the Wild Things Are* from the bookshelf instead. ‘Come on Joshie, what about this one? You love this book. Just be good for Uncle Jake while Dad and I do the dishes.’

‘No. Windies Willows.’

He’s found it on the bottom shelf, already has it in his hands and is jumping up on to my lap so fast that I nearly spill my wine down his back. Within three seconds the older two are wedged in under my arms and three pairs of hands are pushing the pages over to get to the start of the story. ‘Whoah, steady.’ I put down my wine glass, halt their frantic page turning and flip back to the inside cover, to something I’ve only half seen.

*Dear Anna, Lucas and Joshua,*

*Merry Christmas for 2010*

*much love, Uncle Jake xxx*

It’s Bliss’s handwriting. We weren’t speaking to each other back then. I look up, thinking she’s still in the lounge, but she’s already left the room and though I can see straight through into the kitchen, she has her back to me as she opens the dishwasher. Buffoon’s got the hot water running and long yellow dishwashing gloves on, both hands pumping the detergent bottle, squirting it from a great height.

Anna taps my cheek, ‘Mum said this book is special because it came all the way from London.’

Bliss is stacking the dishwasher quietly. I still can’t see her face.

Joshie pulls out of my arms, ‘Anna has a vagina. I’ve got a penis and Lucas has got a penis. Do you wanna see?’<sup>11</sup>

I hoick his shorts back up, ‘No really, woo, thank you very much though, let’s put your meat and two veg away now.’ This sets them all off, throwing their heads back in a series of naughty kiddie giggles that makes me laugh too.

Lucas pipes up, ‘Mum never lets us say anything like that. We have to use the proper names.’

‘Well then, what about a fruit bowl – a banana and two plums hey? What do you think of that?’ And they’re off again; Lucas has thrown his whole body over the couch in a huge guffaw and little Joshie’s jumping on the armrest and covering his mouth at the mischief of it all.

‘What have I got?’ asks Anna.

‘Sorry?’

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<sup>11</sup> Oh my God, not this conversation.

‘Mine must have a funny name too?’

And I’m stumped.<sup>12</sup> I can’t find anything that doesn’t sexualise her, nothing that’s just silly and cute and fun for an eight-year-old girl. I just look at her, and I’m about to say ‘fortune cookie’<sup>13</sup> but Lucas yells, ‘Quick, Mum’s coming.’ They all clamber in, these warm, squirmy little bodies with quick, pale eyes and the upturned family nose. I hug them in tight. How did I stay away from this for so long?

‘You kids behaving yourselves in here?’

A chorus of, ‘Yes Mum.’<sup>14</sup>

I point to the inscription on the front page and mouth a ‘thank you’. She leans over the back of the couch and pats my hair.

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It’s that curious time of evening where synthetic light has no power to illuminate. Electricity won’t have any clout until the sun dips. I’m following her single file to the bench by the back fence. We’re closed in by fat shiny eggplants that just have to be touched, snow peas, zucchini and their furry one way, prickly the other shade leaves, and I’m folding into the tall greenness of it all. Bliss is plucking vegetables from between the stakes, strings and trellises marking out our narrow rectangular path, filling me a calico bag with food as we meander. She looks back and snorts, ‘Lord, Jake stop fondling that zucchini like it’s an ersatz wang. I grew it.’

‘Bliss, really, sometimes a zucchini is just a zucchini.’

‘Not when you’re stroking it like that – then it’s a courgette.’

‘*Ce n’est pas une pipe.*’

She corrects me: ‘*Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*’<sup>16</sup>

‘You know *pipe* means blowjob in French right?’

Handing me the calico bag with accompanying eyeroll, she says, ‘Well, you know, with Magritte everything is exactly as it seems.’

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<sup>12</sup> Only the worst ones come to mind: hairy pasty, bearded clam, sausage wallet. All appalling.

<sup>13</sup> Thank God I didn’t because it’s not even funny.

<sup>14</sup> King of the kids, me.

<sup>15</sup> Mind the gap.

<sup>16</sup> *say see neigh pars oon peep.*

We squat near the lavender bushes that skirt the water tank, crushing and smearing the floppy leaves with our fingertips to get at the oil. She coaxes, ‘Three types of lavender, smell them they’re all different.’

The deep royal purple one with the fluffy tops is the show off. So sharp and full, so potent I can hardly get my nose around it. I inhale and recoil in the same moment and she’s tipping over, falling on her arse and laughing in that lovely throaty gurgle she gets. She brings the bushel right up under her nose and pushes her top lip up to peg it firm, making a caterpillar moustache. And now we’re both honking like geese, big remember-back-to-when-we-were-little-and-we-did-this laughs. I pick a couple more and make wibbly-wobbly caterpillar eyebrows and she’s still honking. Buffoon is on the decking near the back door now, peering into the dim evening half-light, trying to find the trapdoor into our secret sibling club.<sup>17</sup>

And I’m suddenly sad for myself. She is happy here. Well, happy enough that that word has some resonance. I feel like I know her again. I’d forgotten how much I love her. She seems at ease, playful, immediate. And I feel rehearsed and modern.

‘Do you always come out here at night?’ I ask.

‘Always, even in winter. I water at night mostly, the garden takes it up better and it means that Rob has to deal with the kids.’

We sit on the brick steps to open a new bottle of wine and I take a slug without even looking at the label. ‘Shit this is good.’

‘Mmm, one of his special-special bottles.’

‘Won’t he miss it?’

‘Of course, but it’s a celebration isn’t it?’

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<sup>17</sup> Sign on the cubbyhouse door reads: No Buffoons Allowed.

## **Research statement**

### ***Research background***

This short fiction, developed as part of the creative component of my thesis, engages with the AAWP conference stream 4: Refashioning the self.

### ***Research contribution***

In *Story and discourse*, Seymour Chatman proposes that ‘the implied author’ is able to establish ‘a secret communication with the implied reader’ (1978, 233), offering a definition of unreliable narration that includes an implied author who operates as an implicit signaller of dissonance in the text. Readers have a strong tendency to give credence to first-person or witness accounts, privileging them at a minimum as authentic, (if not truthful), and in order to determine narration as reliable or unreliable, readers will often become attuned to looking for the gaps or dissonance between that of the implied author’s signals and delivery of the story. In *Little Bliss*, the narrator Jake, in offering secretive ‘whispered asides’ and ‘self-edits’ to the reader, as well as corrective interpretations of events, functions as an ersatz implied author. He becomes in effect his own signaller of discord in text, unexpectedly (considering there are dual registers in the text) rendering his narration more ‘reliable’ than the envisaged ‘unreliable’.

### ***Research significance***

The significance of this research is that the text explores reliable/unreliable narrative modes and draws attention to the reading process through the inclusion of footnotes that decentre the reading. The footnotes can easily be ignored, or alternatively they can function as a secondary, complementary commentary, establishing a dual frame and a layered narrative action within the text. Its value is evidenced by its inclusion within the double-refereed creative stream of the 20th Australasian Association of Writing Programs conference.

## **List of works cited**

Chatman, Seymour 1978 *Story and discourse: Narrative structure in fiction and film*, Ithaca, NY Cornell University Press