

Long Paddock

TESSA LUNNEY

The Ghost at the Wedding by Shirley Walker

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The creek itself seemed serene, but beneath the surface was a submerged forest, the domain of eels and catfish. The eels tore the webbed feet off any domesticated ducks that ventured into the water, and the catfish, fat pallid creatures with poisonous whiskers, mewled and squeaked when the fishermen threw them up onto the grass to die... The creek had its own bloodthirsty rules. Down there it was war.^[1]

The Ghost at the Wedding is a fictionalised memoir of the family that Shirley Walker married into. Written from the perspective of her mother-in-law, Jessie, Walker has created a flowing story, moving backwards and forwards in time like the tides of the Clarence River around the family homestead. This memoir doubles as a war story where the mothers and wives hold equal place with the soldiers, and home is the battlefield where actions have their lasting consequences.

The facts of the family history are only occasionally pointed out, such as when Walker herself is in a place of family significance, like Woolloomooloo dock where two generations of men sailed to battle. Mostly, the facts of history are absorbed into the re-enactment of the Walkers' life, where the internal landscape of the soldiers, mothers, and wives is portrayed in as much detail as Flanders, New Guinea, or Yamba. Walker imagines what Jessie was thinking when she wrote a letter, what the returned men saw in their night terrors, and the reason for a half-smile in a photograph. The fictional element of this memoir lets Walker be less rigid with the facts to get closer to the emotional truth of the family's life. It is this sensitive, unsentimental portrayal, giving stories to the silent veteran, and the family that suffered with him, that makes this memoir stand out in an already crowded field. It is no doubt one of the reasons Walker was co-awarded, with Sara Knox^[2], the Asher Literary Award for writing by women with an anti-war message.

The Ghost at the Wedding begins with Jessie in a nursing home in 1983, finally able to fulfil her desire to paint after decades of farm work. Through Jessie's expressionistic paintings, Walker moves from the Hebrides in the mid-nineteenth century, when Jessie's ancestors were evicted from their land, to the Clarence River farming community at Federation, through to World War I and World War II. Jessie was part of the World War I generation, whereas her sons and youngest brothers were part of the World War II generation. War became the canvas on which the rest of their lives were drawn. How they coped provides the colour and substance of this memoir, as shown in the following extract, with Jessie at her son's house in Townsville at the end of World War II:

But no matter how much she tried to empty out her memory, attempting to admit only the sounds and perfumes of the night, her mind always swung, like the most accurate of compasses, due north. Past the Torres Strait islands to New Guinea, its hot and steamy jungles, its stench of death. Something bad had happened to her eldest son there.^[3]

Les Walker, Jessie's son in New Guinea, is the man Shirley married. But it is not Jessie's son Les, but Jessie's husband, Ted Walker, who dominates the book as he does the family. Ted had his face badly damaged in France, and went through multiple, rudimentary reconstructions. His bowels were permanently damaged from months of dysentery in Gallipoli. Both of his brothers had been killed, as had his best friend, Jessie's brother, whom he had sworn to protect. Between 1915, and his discharge in 1917, he was sent to the Front as soon as he could walk after illness. He came home lonely, furious and determined to create a better life.

It is the rage and remorse, Ted's jerks between loving care and harsh brutality, that Shirley Walker holds up as one of the ongoing costs of war. Ted's shell shock shaped Jessie's life, and the lives of their children:

Why was it, Jessie wondered, that for her the very fact of being happy invited trouble? ...After five years on Turkey Island, Ted's restlessness had become unbearable... here, by the dark waters of the channel between the island and the mainland, the nightmares had been too real, the ghosts too close.^[4]

Jessie suffered from the violence between her sons and her husband. Ted's remoteness pushed his sons into World War II; they were glad to escape his beatings and silences, despite the risk. The effect of war on the next generation is made clear: Ted is unable to voice his grief as his sons repeat his mistakes, and they, in turn, are unwilling to share their worst experiences, returning Ted's silence.

Walker delves into Ted's trauma. In one particular scene, after Ted's return, he stands by the Clarence River in northern New South Wales and sees the floating dead of Flanders from the night he washed his face in a river bloated with bodies:

He would stand on the bank looking down into the water for an hour at a time, seeing in place of its serenity the dark waters of the Somme... Sometimes a floating corpse drifted by, turning on the current, pale face lifted to the moon. Ted would stand silent on the bank of the Clarence, hypnotised by his memories.^[5]

It is unlikely that there is any evidence that this is what Ted was thinking at that moment; Ted's reticence is one of the features of the family history. Up to this point, the Clarence had been lovingly described, the sugar cane and abundant wildlife a sort of paradise. Ted's visions in the middle of this create a shocking sense of dislocation, and the paradise is lost for the reader too.

Walker also explores the pain of losing family in two world wars. Jessie's mother, Janet lost a son, Joe, in World War I and his replacement, also called Joe, in World War II. Their death is not written in sentimental terms, or in Anzac-Day rhetoric, but with the same rich imagery and clear prose that Walker uses to describe the Clarence. Built up over several pages, we follow the death as well as the consequences.

Often war memoirs focus on the time served, especially if served overseas, with the book trailing off as the soldier returns home. Here, the home life is the focus, with the women as central to the family and therefore to the understanding of war. This is important, as it is how most of the country had experienced war - through letters from Over There, anxiously

listening to the radio for news, and long periods of waiting. Although home front narratives and women's war stories are increasing in number, they are still not part of the mainstream understanding of war, often overlooked, or only briefly acknowledged. Walker does include sections of the men overseas, from New Guinea, and a long passage on Gallipoli and Flanders in World War I. Some of these passages are quotes from letters and diaries, and others are elaborated from historical detail and family lore. They show the continuing link to home for the soldiers, through letters, and fantasies. These passages also serve to illustrate the suffering once the soldiers returned; Jessie may have been confused by Ted's behaviour, but we are not left in doubt by Walker's writing.

Walker uses old-fashioned language, as though she is not only imagining an earlier time but inhabiting it. Sometimes this comes through as the repeated use of particular phrases, which can be jarring. However, the tone gives the book a fairytale quality, bright colours for dark subject matter, repetition and strong emotion. The fairytale sense is enhanced by the underlying notion that this family is representative. It is very specifically Jessie's story, yet her family suffered in much the same way as many others in rural and urban Australia, her history is unique but not unusual.

The book does not overtly question Australia's involvement in war, but examines the effect of combat on a family. Anyone who has looked through an archive would know that none of the letters home from the Front would be as detailed as Walker's prose. Soldiers hid the truth of fighting from their families, especially from wives and mothers, to protect them, and to avoid admitting the horror to themselves. The shock, when the few men who returned came back with broken limbs and broken hearts, was all the greater.

By looking carefully at this family, Walker subtly criticises war by showing its long-reaching devastation. However, Jessie's determination to survive, and beyond that, to live well, live long and be loving to her family, provide a sense of hopefulness, and even of joy, to alleviate the death and despair; that, despite the pain, meaning can be found amidst the suffering:

So this was the meaning of it all: of the great wash of peoples from the north to the south, the setting out in the white-sailed ships for the land behind the sun, the lost children and young men slaughtered in war. It was all part of the whole, the pain and the loss, the joy and the tenderness, part of the great tree of life, now slowly fading and blending, as she herself was, into polar night.^[6]

[1] Shirley Walker (2009) *The Ghost at the Wedding* Ringwood, Australia: Penguin Books, p 176

[2] Sara Knox (2007) *The Orphan Gunner* Sydney, Australia: Giramondo Publishing

[3] *ibid*, p 234

[4] *ibid*, p 165

[5] *ibid*, p 154

[6] *ibid*, p 247