

MEMORY MATTERS

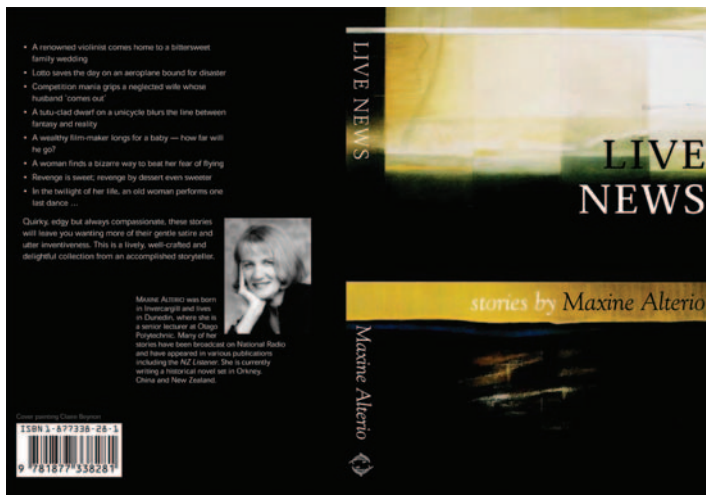
Maxine Alterio

As long as we are alive, our memories remain wonderfully volatile. In their mercurial mirror, we see ourselves.
Jonah Lehrer; *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (Melbourne:Text, 2007), 95.

Throughout childhood, I kept a notebook for 'Ideas.' My jottings contained fantasies about flying unencumbered by machinery – I poked feathers into my jumpers, ate birdseed and studied the habits of birds prior to launching myself off the henhouse roof – through to writing circus scripts that stipulated I had to ride the much-coveted unicycle belonging to the boy next door.

I was also a voracious reader, and I harboured a secret. I wanted to be a writer. However, I had no idea how to go about it. Writers were not visible in Invercargill where I grew up. Readers were though. My parents filled our home with books. At bedtime, my father often deviated from an original story to make it more exciting, scary and memorable.

Imaginative play and creative storytelling were part of my life. So were physical adventures, many of which took place in Arrowtown, where, along with my siblings and cousins, I was free to roam the hills, river and gorge as long as I was home by dark. I particularly relished the occasions we congregated in the remnants of the abandoned Chinese Settlement. Our most daring activities took place in Ah Lum's dilapidated and deserted store, where we locked ourselves in the gold room and made up murderous goldfield tales.



My fascination with Chinese sojourners deepened when at the age of twelve I attended a New Year's party with my parents. While eavesdropping on an adult conversation, I overheard one man tell another, "Well, when they laid out that Chinese miner, they discovered he was a she." This tantalising fragment was the genesis for my first novel, *Ribbons of Grace* (Penguin NZ, 2007), which I wrote 40 years later.

Prior to publishing this novel, I put together a short story collection, *Live News and Other Stories* (Steele Roberts, 2005) and co-authored an academic text entitled *Learning through Storytelling in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning* (RoutledgeFalmer UK and US, 2003). Working with story, in fiction and non-fiction contexts, strengthened my understanding of what it means to develop an empathic understanding of human behaviour. Invariably I strive to make meaning of experiences from other people's perspectives as well as my own and to learn from the reflective process because, as Welty¹ notes, "Each of us is moving, changing with respect to others. As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover ..."

Ideas for my fictional work also come from multiple sources: experience, observation, imagination, eavesdropping, dreams, historical events and snippets from newspapers and magazines. For example, after reading an article on embalming in the *Otago Daily Times*, I wrote a short story called "Stories Bodies Tell," which Radio New Zealand National broadcast in two parts. I cannot always explain why particular topics, themes or ideas capture my attention but I have learned to trust the creative process, to go with what 'feels right.'

Early in my writing career, an astute reviewer observed that I wrote about "love, loss and letting go, and sensual power,"² which, on reflection, is accurate, although I was not aware of it at the time. I suspect three states of consciousness are at work when I write – the conscious (what I already know and want to explore), the subconscious (what I hook into without fully understanding), and the unconscious (aspects that may or may not become overt after the work is finished). The degree to which I am aware of these states depends on the project.

For instance, I did not fully appreciate, at the onset of writing my new novel, *Lives We Leave Behind* (for publication, Penguin NZ, 2012), that family connections had in part guided me to this work. Initially I believed the sole driver was a story a friend told me of a troopship that was torpedoed by a German U-boat on 23 October 1915, in the Aegean Sea, resulting in the loss of ten New Zealand nurses. However, while writing a preface – a bridging narrative between my novel (creative component) and my thesis (critical component) for a PhD in creative writing³ – I was able to 'see' that several ancestors who had links either to nursing or to the First World War had been nudging me along too.

Mostly I write because an inner 'unexplained' force compels me to make sense of experience, history, ideas and human behaviour through story. A day without writing, reading or storytelling feels to me as though it has not been well lived.

Maxine Alterio is a short story writer and a novelist with an interest in narrative-based learning, teaching and research methodologies. She lives in Dunedin, where she works as a staff developer and principal lecturer at Otago Polytechnic.

1 Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 102.

2 Mark Peters, *Dominion Post*, 5 February 2005.

3 I am undertaking this PhD at the International Institute of Modern Letters, Victoria University of Wellington.

