“Jaida,” a Novel: The Queer Possibilities of “Jaida,” an Exegesis

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a hybrid thesis; that is, a combination of a creative work (the novel, *Jaida*) and an academic exegesis of the various theoretical underpinnings that informed the writing of this middle grade novel. In the following exegesis, I detail and reflect upon some of the critical thought processes that provided a backdrop to the creation of the creative work, and highlight certain themes from the primary text in relation to contemporary research in the fields of queer theory and children’s literature.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Kathleen Forrester. It is the academic portion only of a hybrid creative/academic thesis. The creative portion consists of the manuscript of an upper middle grade novel, *Jaida*, also by Kathleen Forrester.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This exegesis is the academic portion of a hybrid creative/academic thesis. In this critical component, I set out to both inquire into, and reflect upon, certain processes, concepts, and themes that shaped and influenced the writing of the upper middle grade novel *Jaida*, an 80,000-word manuscript that is the unpublished creative portion of this hybrid creative/academic thesis.

While the binary of creative writing versus critical writing is often upheld, particularly in academic discourses, it is my experience that the two have much in common—overlapping in a myriad of blurred lines and uncountable ways. The critical learning I undertook over the course of my master’s degree, particularly in the realm of queer theory, deeply informed the writing of *Jaida*. Conversely, my lived experiences as a queer person and my writing upon this subject, underscored and breathed life and felt knowledge into my study of queer criticism. For this reason, I have elected to narrow my reflection and inquiry here through a queer lens, drawing upon the work of Judith Butler, and other queer theorists, as well as my personal experience to critique, question, and comment upon various aspects of the novel and its creation.

In this first chapter, I will give background to the novel, my motivations, and the creative processes I engaged in while writing, as well as outline some significant terms used throughout this exegesis. In the second chapter, I will dive more thoroughly into an application of queer theory to contemplate three key themes of the novel: adolescence, family, and storytelling. An analysis of both poetic and structural elements of the novel are woven throughout, anchoring the theoretical inquiry in an open-ended dialogue with the intent and hopes I held as an author while writing this creative work of fiction for youth.
1.1 Motivation and Origins of Interest

When I first began writing *Jaida* as part of a creative writing class in the winter of 2013, my intention was to write a queer middle grade novella in the genre of magical realism that delved into questions concerning the intersubjectivity of memory and identity. Nearly three-hundred pages and three years later the project has grown and changed considerably. Nevertheless, the seeds of my intention have carried through, and I am in a position now to reflect on the various influences and conceptual beginnings that drew me to this project.

My attraction to the genre of magical realism began after reading two novels by David Almond: *Skellig* and *Kit’s Wilderness*. In both these poetic texts written for young people, I was struck by the way in which a blurring of boundaries between the magic and real, and the impact this had on characters’ identities and growth, opened up space for me as a reader to question hierarchies of knowledge—not only within the text, but also within my own experiences of society. Both of the Almond books, I found, provided a dialogic study on the interwoven aspects of memory and identity, the past and the present, and history and mythology, and they did so by allowing for the “fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds…that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction” (Zamora and Farris 5). I was deeply excited by the possibilities of the genre, imagining it to be the perfect form for my novel project in which I planned to engage in a layered and complex fictional exploration of queer histories and subjectivities.

As it turns out, my novel, *Jaida*, (as it stands now) cannot strictly be called a work of magical realism according to certain definitions, for it does not contain an “irreducible element” of magic embedded within the phenomenal world (Farris 7), rather these elements
remain subjective and unconfirmed projections, stories and dreams of certain characters. In
spite of this, I believe that the genre’s subversive and transgressive (Bowers 67)
preoccupation with engaging “inbetweenness” as a means to resist “monologic political and
cultural structures” (Zamora and Farris 5), deeply influenced the choices I made in my
writing, complementing my queer intentions as I drew upon storytelling, history, myth,
fantasy, and felt knowledge to challenge and question “norms that govern contemporary
notions of reality” (*Undoing Gender* 29).

In writing *Jaida*, I wanted to write a story about queerness that, as a child, I was never
given the opportunity to read—one that not only shows representations of LGBT (Lesbian,
Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people, but integrates these representations into a broader
context of historical (and contemporary) resilience and survival while simultaneously
presenting the expansiveness of queer lives as an embodiment of plurality and possibility. I
wanted to write a novel that stretched the limits of dominant epistemologies and allowed for
other ways of knowing and being. I wished to position the reader so as to recognise that the
category of “real” is not definite, and that, therefore, all “assumptions about truth are also at
stake” (Bowers 68). I was influenced in this pursuit by the writings of sociologist Jeffrey
Prager who has done extensive work in memory studies and also in intergenerational trauma.
He writes:

> The need to remember can overwhelm history itself; the aspiration to express certain
> feeling states, or to achieve or dispel others, may bring into play fantasy,
> imagination, and reconstruction that are hardly synonymous with the past. (*Prager*
> 111)
Prager’s work deeply informed my study on the interplay that occurs between memory and storytelling in the processes of remembering and telling history. In the early days of my master’s program I wrote a critical paper relating his theories to Kit’s Wilderness, noticing the ways that Almond utilises storytelling throughout the novel as a subjective and cultural modality for intergenerational healing from past traumas. Aware that so often in empirical studies history is branded as a determinative event to be accurately recorded, I was excited about the political possibilities of storytelling as a means for telling alternative histories, and I wanted to find a way to explore this complex territory further.

At this point in my studies, inspired by Almond’s novels, I decided to try my hand at writing my own novel for young people, in which I would explore the liminality of memory and storytelling with a specific focus on queer lives and queer histories. I didn’t know if I could pull off such a hefty task having never written a long form piece before, but the framework of my master’s degree felt like a unique opportunity to take on new challenges and also to deepen my craft as a writer. And so I took the first tentative steps and wrote a few chapters—not really knowing where I was going with it—but trying to trust the process. At a certain point, the characters strengthened and the story of Jaida took hold, tugging at its moorings and asking to be let free. It was at this time that I made the decision to devote myself to the project as a thesis, and so I tucked my theoretical convictions and critical foundations into a deep pocket at the back of my brain (for later, when I was to write the exegesis!) and gave all my creative energies to the story that wanted to be told. For the moment, I was no longer an academic musing on these conceptual ideas, but a curious storyteller… learning to listen… learning to feel… learning to write.
1.2 Summary of Jaida

Jaida Wood—goat-girl, science kid, day-dreamer—lives on Saltpan Island off the west coast of British Columbia. She lives with her mom, Rae, her other mom, Larissa, and Oscar, her transgender (gender fluid) sort-of-but-not-really ‘uncle’, who is her favourite person in all the world. She also has an escape-artist goat, Guinevere, who she likes to think of as the fifth member of her family.

A budding geologist, Jaida generally prefers life to move at the calculable slow pace of the earth’s tectonic plates. She likes to take rambles by herself up the ridge behind her house to think, and to pass long hours in her room arranging and rearranging her rock collection. A creature of habit, she looks forward to summer time when she can run free from morning till night with her best friend Troy, making up games and exploring the small island near his house that they call The Kingdom. This is what they always have done in the summer, and always will do… Or so Jaida likes to think…

But then, the summer Jaida turns thirteen, the steady plates of her life begin to shift and slip in unpredictable ways. Oscar, who is sixty-six, has recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s Disease, and not long before the end of the school year he gets lost and is badly injured in a fall. He spends over a month in hospital recovering, and when he returns home—at the start of the summer holidays—he is greatly changed from the person Jaida has known and loved all her life. Jaida’s summer plans are tossed to the side as she is thrust into the role of caregiver for her beloved Oscar whose dementia has progressed such that he no longer even knows who she is.

Jaida cares for Oscar, remembering back over their relationship. All her life Oscar has entertained her with stories; merging Irish legends (as told to him by his Irish mother) with
his own fantastical take on reality, he would thrill her with tales of his dramatic escape on the back of a dragon to the mythical island of Tír na nÓg. As Oscar moves through the non-linear stages of dementia, Jaida begins to understand that perhaps there is more ‘truth’ to these stories than she had previously been aware. She uncovers a secret album, containing old photographs and documents, and her suspicions are confirmed as she realises that Oscar’s early life contained painful and traumatic events, including a forced stay at a psychiatric hospital from which he escaped, fleeing his homeland (Tasmania, Australia), and leaving behind his family of origin, to start a new life in Canada.

Jaida delves further into Oscar’s history, (a history that she is not sure she is entitled to as he never chose to share the details with her, but one that she nevertheless pursues), and Oscar begins to tell new stories—‘real’ stories from his childhood—as he relives aspects of his past. Jaida observes that his body holds much of the memory that his mind no longer has access to. She recognises that he is not gone from her, but rather is changed and changing.

Meanwhile, the island is heating up due to a lack of rain, and the pressure is building in all Jaida’s relationships. There is friction in her home as her moms disagree on how best to move forward with Oscar’s care, and Jaida’s relationship with Troy, also, takes a turn for the worse after they argue and he stops calling her. Jaida has a reoccurring dream in which she is riding on the back of a dragon through the night and then falls off into blackness. There is always someone behind her in these dreams, someone who—try as she might—she can’t turn around and see. The dream intensifies and develops over the summer, but always she is left wondering who is there behind her.

Jaida sets out to help Oscar through a series of ‘scientific experiments’ in which she tries to reconnect him to the present through activities that he enjoyed as a young person.
While the experiments are vaguely successful (particularly as Oscar gets back into swimming which he loves), Jaida soon realises that instead of putting so much energy into trying to get back her ‘old’ Oscar, she needs to pay attention to the person he is now.

She makes up with Troy, and for her thirteenth birthday they sneak up the back of the ridge behind her house (where Rae has forbidden them to go) and stargaze. Jaida shares with Troy her growing doubts about reality being a scientifically knowable thing, and they agree that maybe truth is all about perspective. She looks over at the high school on the opposite island (which she will be attending for the first time come September) and no longer feels resistant to this new and big change in her life.

On their way back down the ridge Jaida and Troy see smoke coming from the valley below. They race back to the house; it is on fire and Oscar is nowhere to be found. Jaida panics and races off to search for him, fearing him injured or worse. She finds him down at the lake enjoying a leisurely morning swim, entirely unaware of the mayhem he has caused back at the house (it was he who started the fire).

As Jaida prepares to start high school she steps into a new role, that of storyteller, and shares her own story—partially made up, and partially from her dream—as a way to make sense of life’s events and also as a means for imagining hope into the future. She knows now that Oscar is not going to get better, and seeks out ways to find meaning and play within the moments they have together.

1.3 Overview of Creative Process

It took three years to write and revise Jaida to its current state. In theory one might describe this state as a polished second draft, but in practice it’s difficult to separate out all the minor
revisions and edits that were made along the way into two such distinct rewrites—such is the messy process of writing a first novel without much in the way of an outline! My creative supervisor, Alison Acheson, describes this approach as ‘pantsing’, as in, ‘flying by the seat of one’s pants’, and to a certain extent this accurately captures the unwieldiness of my experience. And yet, as many pantser's attest, the absence of an outline does not mean that the author has no idea where the novel is going. On a practical and affective level, I had a strong sense of what I wanted to say with this project, and also, to a certain extent what I did not want to say.

For example, this was always going to be a story set on a small southern gulf island, featuring a twelve-year-old girl protagonist who is a bit of a science nerd, and who is somewhat resistant to change. Her family was always to be a queer configuration of blood and choosing, although in initial drafts she had a little brother, and the character of Oscar was still a bit of a mystery to me. Structurally speaking, the main plot was always to unfold over the course of one summer—the summer between when Jaida finishes elementary school and enters high school.

Thematically, from my perspective, this is a novel about ‘doing’ family. I wanted to say something about the complicated ways we can identify as kin, and the actively messy and heart-filled work that goes with being there for one another through all life’s changes. What I did not want to do was write a prescriptive treatise on growth as a linear process, in which all plotlines and all uncertainties are, in the end, neatly wrapped up. By trusting my instincts, and through paying close attention to the characters as they began to take shape, I was able to find my way—page by page—into a storyline that I couldn’t have dreamed of at the outset.
And as the plot elements emerged, and the story began to shine through, I believe I became a better writer. I also, by necessity, became a better researcher.

The novel has required extensive research, particularly concerning the character Oscar. I read many documents on the medical and neurological aspects of Alzheimer’s Disease, but also spent equal amounts of time on forums for caregivers of people with Alzheimer’s as well as informally interviewing friends and acquaintances about their experiences with the disease. I also undertook research into the torrid history of psychiatric hospitals and the treatment of queer and transgender peoples in these medicalised spaces over the past fifty years. This included a trip to the actual Royal Derwent Hospital (around which I built the fictional history of Oscar’s confinement and escape), the now abandoned “lunatic asylum” in New Norfolk, Tasmania, that was in operation from 1827 right up until the year 2000. My research extended more generally into a ‘taking of the pulse’ of Tasmania in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly taking into consideration what it might have been like to be a teenager as the Vietnam War broke out. As someone who grew up in Australia (but not in the sixties, and not in Tasmania) it was fascinating to explore, in a localised fashion, this recent history that had such profound impacts on my parents and grandparents’ generations. I curated some of my findings into a creative research project I did for a class, in which I constructed a scrapbook narrative that visually explored various plotlines through the eyes of both Oscar and Jaida. This project, undertaken at an early stage in the process of writing, helped me integrate my research into actual characterizations and contributed greatly to my development of plot.

In terms of the novel’s setting on the fictional “Saltpan Island”, my nine years living on the west coast of Canada and falling in love with the temperate rainforests and coastal
landscapes deeply influenced my writing. Specifically, the summer and fall I spent living in a stationary yellow school bus on South Pender Island at a friend’s place, gardening and working on natural building projects, inspired and informed the land and life of the place Jaida calls home. One of the nicest parts of my process has involved visiting that place again and again over the past three years, walking up the ridge, exploring the beaches, sitting with the chickens, and then returning to a cozy wood fire to hunker down and write another chapter.

1.4 Significant Terms: Understanding Queer as Discourse and Action

Queer: Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd, in their introduction to *Over the Rainbow*, write “[q]ueer defies definition, indeed is the antidote to definition…” (4), and yet, in order to frame the inquiry and reflection I undertake in this exegesis, I will do my best to give a sense of what it is that I mean when I use the term queer. Queer is a “fraught” term, because its meaning is always shifting depending on the “social and personal histories” of the person using the term (Sedgewick 9), but this *impossibility* to wholly pin down queer using language, is also what gives the term its flexible strength. Once a synonym for words like “odd”, “strange”, and “eccentric” over the course of the twentieth century the term came to be used in a pejorative sense to signify homosexuality (Abate and Kidd 4; Mallan 186). Only since the 1960s and 1970s, when gay rights movements became active, has the term been reclaimed as a marker of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) identity (Abate and Kidd 4). But for many, including myself, queer is far more expansive than a ‘catch-all’ term for various non-heterosexual identities, rather it is better understood as a term
that stands for those that fall outside of the narrowly prescribed norms of what we call society.

**Queer Theory:** An academic discourse that has grown out of grass-roots movements, as well as out of LGBT, women’s, and feminist studies, Queer theory “understands the categories of gender and sexuality not as stable, but as shifting, malleable, contextual” (“Queer Theory” 255). Building on the work of post-structuralists (Foucault in particular), queer theorists show that sexuality and gender are discursive constructs, processes of becoming rather than inherent and biological attributes of human identity. Judith Butler, specifically, contends that *all* gender is performative, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time, to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 43-4). For Butler, performativity is not simply a means through which dominant culture reinforces norms, but it is also an opportunity and strategy for resistance.

In this sense, the utilization of the term queer by academics today, is in many ways similar to that of the early grass-roots movements that brought the term queer into the realm of affirmative, politicized and radicalized action—in both cases queer is employed as a *resistance* against the tendencies of a dominant culture to leverage language as a means to shape and limit social intelligibility so as to privilege some, whilst excluding (and oppressing) others. Both queer grass-roots movements and queer theorists, also, tend to recognize the expansive possibilities for queer ways of knowing and being that are opened out when identity and language are no longer understood to operate monolithically, but rather are embraced as malleable, contingent, and flexible sites for subjective meaning-making.
**Queering/Queered/Queerly**: In my theorising, I tend often to use the term queer as a verb—as a means to describe the (theoretical and embodied) action of pushing back at, and deconstructing, oppressive categorizations that rest upon essentialist binary oppositions. In this sense, queer can signify a way of doing, a way of reading/viewing, and also a way of being (it must be understood, however, that this ‘being’ is a process—unfixed and free to move about). For this reason, I tend to use variations of the term, such as “queerly”, “queered”, and “queering” throughout my writing as a way to frame text, or an identity, or perhaps a worldview, as a site that might be opened to processes of resignification. To queer something is to put language and meaning into play; it is to invite non-normative and non-hierarchical ways of seeing and knowing. As such, queer is a means for rewriting the bounds of what has come to be called ‘reality’.
Chapter 2: Critical Inquiry and Reflection

“Do you really believe in fairies?” Jaida was stretched out under the arbutus in the damp moss.

“Do you believe in people?” Oscar, leaning against the thick trunk, eyes closed, answered her. “Do you believe that spring follows winter?” He delicately picked at the peeling bark, revealing the bright green of new growth beneath.

“I don’t have to believe. I can see spring—” Jaida waved her hands in the air.

“I can hear it. The birds singing are real. We are real.”

“So then, if something is real you don’t have to believe in it?

“I guess…”

“Well then I don’t believe in fairies. I don’t need to. They’re real.”

“But you can’t see or hear them?”

“Can’t I?” Oscar tilted his head just a little as though he were listening. “You believe in dinosaurs and you can’t see or hear them. You believe in the big bang even...that seems pretty far out to me.”

“No, but there’s evidence. I mean the big bang is a theory—and so’s the dinosaurs, I suppose, but there’s evidence everywhere. And most people agree…”

“So that’s what makes things real? Evidence and lots of people agreeing?”


“Public opinion and scientific evidence makes things real, then?” Oscar grinned. “I’m beginning to feel a bit faint, a bit faded. Am I disappearing at all? Maybe I’m not as real as I thought I was.” (Jaida 174-175)
In writing *Jaida*, I was primarily concerned with telling a story that, at heart, challenges and opens up notions of a singular reality or truth. I wanted to explore liminal spaces in which memory, storytelling, and experience overlap and inform a kind of felt knowledge—one that is subjective, flexible and, importantly, valued. I did not wish to take for granted societal norms in the telling of this fictional story, nor did I wish to prescribe a new set of norms, rather this narrative is intended to queerly invite the possibility that reality might be a non-linear process of construction and deconstruction, fantasy and embodiment, that the characters, and also the reader, can participate in.

My thoughts in this regard are informed by the work of queer theorists—Judith Butler in particular, who writes:

> [P]ractices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone. (*Undoing Gender* 29)

Butler is referring to the political work of (drag, butch, femme, trans, etc.) persons who, through resisting pre-established categories of identification, push and rewrite the boundaries of sex and gender. She notes how the circuitous processes of fantasy and embodiment actively transform established ideas of what is, and who are, commonly held to be possible and real (and conversely impossible and unreal), and thus carves out a space for a recognition of the fluidity of queer lives and diverse realities within the social world.
While *Jaida* does engage with gender as a central theme (particularly through the experiences of transgender character, Oscar), in reflecting upon this creative work, I apply Butler’s theory generally as a critical lens through which to think queerly about possibilities for recognising and instituting “new modes of reality” in various aspects of the novel’s content and form. Specifically, in section 2.1, I consider adolescence, and by extension, the adolescent reader, as a construct of contemporary assumptions and logic. In this, I am building on the work of Gabrielle Owen as she operationalises Butler’s theory of gender (in which gender is shown to be a discursive construct) as a means by which to untangle the cultural mythology surrounding the idea of adolescence, from the realities (strange, complex and queer) of lived experience. In section 2.2, I reflect upon the theme of family within the novel, again (as I do with adolescence) detaching the concept from a fixed and established meaning in order to consider other ways of knowing and doing that queerly exceed and rework normative perceptions of reality. Finally, in section 2.3, I consider the role of storytelling in queer history and survival; fantasy, as Butler and other queer theorists have shown, can move us beyond a fictionalised vision and into the embodied realm of world-building a more just and inclusive future for all.

As mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of Chapter One, I do not subscribe to a dichotomy between the creative and critical, and yet, it must be noted, the theoretical discourses that I apply throughout this exegesis to the novel were not at the forefront of my mind while I was actually engaged in writing the piece. I find the daily lived and embodied emotional and physical lives of characters to be far more compelling than any theoretical quandary when I am crafting the fictional world of a story. It is only now, at this resting point
between drafts, that I deliberately usher forth a critical lens to frame my processes in relation to scholarly questionings and theories. I find this exegesis to be a useful and interesting form of reflection and inquiry, and one that I suspect will inform future rewrites of the manuscript. All the same, I suspect my novel is best served when I give close attention to characters and their emotional arcs, rather than base writerly decisions on the suppositions of a theoretical agenda.

2.1 Queering Adolescence

“I see.” Larissa’s voice was calm again. Too calm. “You’ll trust Jaida with caring for Oscar—by herself. You’ll give her the full responsibility of an adult—but you won’t trust her with the TRUTH?”

The bedroom door swung open with a bang and Larissa stormed out, blasting down the stairs all pointed limbs and gulping sighs.

Jaida shrunk further into the shadows.

“Truth?” She heard Rae say from the bedroom. “What the hell is that?” And the light went out. (Jaida 82)

Gabrielle Owen, in her article, “Toward a Theory of Adolescence,” considers fictional scenes of adolescent reading in a variety of historical and contemporary young adult texts, as a means to queerly reveal how “adolescence functions as a socially constructed category” (111) that is predicated on established ideologies of childhood and adulthood. She makes the point that, while ‘adult’ is considered to be a relatively stable identity category, adolescence has been construed as an unstable and transitional time, a time of moving away from ideals
of childhood (innocent, impressionable, object) toward this illusion of stable adulthood (mature, realised, subject). The universalising language used to describe adolescence, words like ‘rebellious’, ‘insecure’, and ‘puberty’, shape a limited cultural mythology that diverges sharply from the lived experiences of a diverse group of people whose age happens to fall within the numbered years that end with ‘teen’. Puberty, in particular, is a biological term that ties identity to the reproductive capacities of the body and indicates, through a myriad of mainstream discourses, that heterosexual development is the socially normative trajectory of growth (114).

Owen’s theory of adolescence builds on queer theory in so far as it is grounded in disrupting notions of identity. Such a problematization of identity is worthwhile, she writes, “because so many of us fail to inhabit existing categories in expected or recognizable ways” (“Toward” 112). The implications of this, in terms of my own process around writing *Jaida*, are two fold: first, at the level of form and genre, it affords me a lens through which to consider my intention in sitting down to write a novel that, if published, will be marketed within the upper middle grade or young adult streams of the commercial book world; secondly, at the level of character, I am positioned to reflect upon the values and ideologies I bring to a representation of a fictional young person, the protagonist Jaida, who is situated on the cusp of adolescence.

Let me first consider the question of form and genre. As an adult, writing for young people, I am implicated in an oft unacknowledged position of power. In a sense, I am afforded a platform from which I get to say what counts as knowledge, whereas the implied reader—the child or adolescent—is rarely positioned in such a seat of epistemological authority. Published writing for young people is almost always written by adults (Harper 40),
for better or for worse it is a ‘given’ of the genre, and one that, I would suggest, comes with an enormous responsibility on the part of the writer. The responsibility is not to educate and direct young minds as has been the common driving force historically behind much children’s literature (Stephens 3), rather it is an authorial challenge to self to build a keen and ongoing process of awareness around one’s own ideologies and worldviews as they overtly and covertly inform the story being told.

My sense of the world, not to mention my nostalgia and projections about being a child and ‘growing up’, are inevitably present in my writing. My personal mythology is embedded within a cultural mythology surrounding childhood and adolescence, and no doubt my desires and vulnerabilities are there as well. Jacqueline Rose famously writes, “[t]here is no child behind the category of ‘children’s fiction,’ other than the one which the category sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes” (10). Rose is referring to the fantasy and desire-filled projection that underscores the relationality between adult and child; for her, this relationship is defined by “impossibility” (1) because the very category of child is tenuously strung between a constructed ideal and the rich and complex realities of lived experience. Similarly, as Owen points out, Julia Kristeva has written about the adolescent as the “mythical figure of the imaginary…” (135), applying the psychoanalytic lens of abjection—“that which can be neither subject or object but is radically denied or cast out” (“Toward” 120)—to this in-between territory of teenagehood. Both Kristeva and Rose’s arguments indicate that language will always fall short when it comes to naming and constructing identity; as Owen neatly summarises, for queers, and indeed for many others, “the name doesn’t fit, can’t fit” (“Queer Theory” 264).
For me, as a queer person who writes for youth, these assertions are both intimidating and freeing. Intimidating, on the one hand, because what is one to do with this *impossible* relationality between the adult and child, this imagined mythology of the adolescent? Am I doomed to be ever complicit in a reinforcement of age categorization that belies the complex subjectivities of the child and adolescent readers I deign to represent and try to reach in my writing? And yet, on the other hand, freeing… because *impossibility* is at the very heart of queer ways of being and knowing ("Queer Theory" 258). It is a word that recognises the ideological and material ways that queer lives expand, exceed and fall outside of rigid categorizations and monolithic meanings, challenging the perimeters of what is to be called reality. In this regard, *impossibility* might be recognised as an opportunity for movement and space around questions of identity, it might be embraced as a reminder that meaning-making is always a contingent and fluid process, language is always imperfect, and that it is in the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" (Sedgewick 8) that we begin to move beyond dichotomous categorizations based in power and exclusion, to explore the liminal terrain of subjective experience and truth.

The social and capitalist world of children’s book publishing insists on marketable, age based categorizations, and I willingly comply, describing my novel as an upper middle grade novel and writing a kind of *Entwicklungsroman*—a “novel of development” (Trites 7)—as is expected in this genre. I am, through processes of socialization and also through my own desire to be published, part of the system that reinforces universalised significations between age and identity that I don’t necessarily believe in. However, I do find hope in the queer possibilities that come with entrusting a reader to read perversely, to locate “perversion
at the centre of Western life and thought” (Hurley 119) as they deconstruct norms from the inside out, to enter and fold back the layers of text and form their own meanings. For this reason, one of my goals in writing *Jaida*, was to write as openly as possible, without prescribing every detail or filling every question so that the reader might have room to build and layer their own meanings—ones that align with, expand upon, or even contradict my ideological perspective. I cannot be free of ideology nor do I need to be, but recognising my worldview is an important part of the process, and leaving narrative space for readers to participate in processes of meaning-making is, I believe, a vital invitation to queerly shape the world of the text to suit one’s own reality—both as it is imagined and as it is lived.

This brings me to the second part of my twofold process of reflection in relation to Owen’s theory of adolescence and the problematization of identity. In considering the novel at the level of character, I may well ask, how have I provided this narratological space that I speak of above? What narrative strategies have I employed to queer the illusory adult-adolescent-child hierarchical relationality so prominent in mainstream discourses? How have I shown characters and relationships that challenge rather than reinforce ideologies of linear growth and development toward a fixed and stable (heterosexual) adult subject position?

My answer to these questions is simply that I did my best to construct a child/adolescent main character whose own journey reflects one of ‘opening out’ to the possibility that reality, as it is experienced and remembered, is neither static nor empirical, and that there is beauty and value in listening to one another’s truths—even (especially) if these truths change over time. My protagonist, Jaida, who turns thirteen over the course of the summer in which the book is set, is a science nerd and rock enthusiast, who at the outset of the narrative is attached to a reality that is both observable and predictable. She is not a fan
of change, as we see in the opening chapters as she buries her hands in the thick moss on top of the ridge “as though it might keep her there, still, while the world kept moving about her” (11). Her journey of growth is relatively internal as she deals, possibly for the first time, with big disruptions to her family life that are beyond her control (specifically Oscar’s dementia), and also readies for high school—a transition that she is, at first, resistant to. Over the course of the novel, remembering back over her years with Oscar and all the stories he has told her, Jaida begins to get a sense of the role perspective plays in reality and the memory of it. “If we’re all going about seeing things differently, depending on where we’re standing, and what we’re looking through, and maybe even what we believe…then what is real?” (248) she asks her best friend Troy. Jaida moves from a position of resisting the changes in Oscar (his dementia and delirium brought about by Alzheimer’s Disease), to trying to ‘fix’ him, to finally beginning to value his complex and ever-changing subjectivity. Jaida’s position at the end of the novel is transitional, she has moved away from an empirically scientific view of the world, and is in a process of figuring out how science fits with, and even complements, a world in which there is mystery and uncertainty. My hope is that her process—incomplete and ongoing as it is—provides a kind of mirror to the reader as to how they might approach the text… as a story that is not finite in its meaning, but rather open to many interpretations. A text that acknowledges “the unstable relation between reader and text” (“Toward” 112) and so invites perverse readings rich with queer possibilities that breach the bounds of the page and extend into the world beyond.

It must be noted that it is not only Jaida who is portrayed on a journey of growth and transition. Importantly, the adult characters are also shown to be, each in their own way, very much coping and figuring things out. Jaida’s parents do not fulfil the illusory ideal of
adulthood as the finishing point in maturation, rather they act on impulses, sometimes argue, and don’t always behave in ways that make rational sense. Jaida observes this with frustration, comparing Rae to a bull who always has to “bulldoze in like she [knows] what [is] best for everyone” (135). Larissa, she views as hawk-like, “overseeing every little thing, making her moves with a calculated grace that land[s] her in the centre of whatever [is] going on” (135).

It is the adults’ imperfections, and their struggles, that provide a backdrop to Jaida’s own growth, very clearly suggesting that adulthood is not synonymous with stability and fixed character, but rather is part of a lifelong process of development, one that is subjective and flawed and that does not necessarily follow a straight and linear path. Rae acknowledges this in the final pages when she apologises to Jaida for her poor communication: “I get lost without a script,” she says, speaking to the vulnerability she as an adult continues to feel when circumstances move beyond her control. While both Rae and Jaida have a difficult time adapting to change, it is Jaida—the child/adolescent figure—who is shown to be most successfully figuring out new ways to integrate and improvise in the face of upheaval. In the penultimate chapter she merges her reoccurring dragon dream (a fantastical dream in which she is flying on the back of a dragon) with her present reality to tell a story of hope and renewal. In taking on the role of storyteller she is actively embodying the queer potentiality of fantasy to “establish the possible in excess of the real” (Undoing Gender 29)—a subject position that Oscar has long occupied. As she engages with the never-ending process of becoming through story, she is challenging old ways of knowing while making space for “new modes of reality” within her life, and to a certain extent, in the lives of those around her. As a writer, I can only hope that Jaida’s journey points the way for readers to also
participate in and continue on with such world-rupturing and world-building exercises within the text, and also within their own lives—imagining and embodying queer ways of being and knowing—reworking and transcending the limitations set by normative categories of identity and growth, including that of adolescence.

2.2 Doing Family Queerly

*Family is complicated. That’s what Jaida thought as the truck pulled up at the market. That’s what she knew. They’d all been calling each other family for as long as she could remember—Rae, Larissa, Oscar and Jaida—family. But Jaida and Rae were the only two actually related by blood—not that blood really mattered to Jaida, to any of them. Rae said, you choose your family and they choose you. Jaida secretly thought this wasn’t quite true—kids didn’t get to choose—but she wasn’t complaining. (Jaida 31)*

Books for children and adolescents have a long history of reflecting and reproducing dominant social and cultural ideologies through a maintenance of a dominant and hegemonic worldviews (Stephens 3; Trites x; Zipes 57). The well-worn trope of ‘we are all the same on the inside’ that is so often found between the covers of children’s stories, nobly sets out to bring people closer through a recognition of commonality, however, the unfortunate and inevitable result is often an erasure of difference through a blanket (normative) approach that bypasses the specificity of lived experience. Likewise, in young adult novels, Thomas Crisp points out that within the abundance of recent titles that promote homosexuality as “positive” the underlying message “still often re[lies] on heteronormative and heterosexist assumptions”
that reinforce harmful stereotypes and ideologies. One of the more obvious sites of intersectional erasure occurs at the level of family—as versions of straight, white, nuclear, biological family structures are repeatedly featured as the benchmark for ‘normal’ family, while other (multi-generational, non-biological, cross-cultural, polyamorous, etc.) ways of experiencing family are disproportionally left out. As numerous studies have shown (Esposito 2009; Epstein 2012; Lester 2014; Shimanoff et. al 2012; and Taylor 2012), even when efforts are made to show queer relationships and families in children’s books, the effect is often an overwhelming enactment of “dequeering” (Esposito 2009) and assimilation, in which characters in same-sex relationships “perform socially expected behaviours connected to heterosexuality… such as maintaining traditionally appropriate gender presentation, engaging in exclusively monogamous lifestyles, and raising children in nuclear families” (Lester 247). While such a presentation of queerness may go easy on the mainstream palette the impact on queer lives is profound, as queerness is repeatedly delimited to a manicured procession of normative subjects, and heteronormative oppression is neither exposed nor addressed.

In writing *Jaida* I wanted to move beyond the oppressive ideology of family as a static cookie-cutter event, and instead invest energy into portraying family as a dynamic and fluid process of doing and becoming. I wanted to explore the idea that family might be understood as a verb (Riggs 27), a playful and necessary mode of active relationality that extends well beyond the bounds of blood and marriage; a kind of kinship that, in Butler’s words “may well be no more or less than the intensification of community ties, may or may not be based on enduring or exclusive sexual relations, and may well consist of ex-lovers, nonlovers, friends and community members” (*Undoing Gender* 127). Thus, when Jaida
describes her family as “complicated” (31) it is neither positive nor negative, but rather, a simple acknowledgement of the complexity of ties that bring and hold her family queerly together.

As a queer writer whose family is made up of intimates both chosen and blood, I set out to tell a story that celebrated queer ways of doing family, but I wanted to do so without making LGBT relationality and/or sexuality the exclusive narrative focus (or problem) of the story. This is not to erase queerness, indeed it could be said that queerness is woven into every aspect of Jaida’s family’s life, rather it is to (hopefully) give the reader the opportunity to situate themselves inside queerness—to recentre ‘normal’ through the eyes of Jaida—if only for as long as it takes to read the novel. For this reason, I made the choice to depict Jaida’s experience of family and community as somewhat idyllic. She has lived a relatively sheltered life on her small gulf island, peripherally aware of, but never actually experiencing first-hand, the impacts of discrimination or oppression. In her view of the world, her family is quite ordinary. The fact that she has grown up with three adults under the same roof, only one of whom she is related to by blood, is not particularly remarkable to her. Neither is the queer relationality between these adults, the age range (Oscar is sixty-six, Rae in her early forties, and Larissa somewhere in her thirties), nor the gender non-conformity of Oscar. For Jaida, her family might be “a bit weird” (32), but it is also (up until Oscar’s decline into delirium and dementia) stable and safe, and because the narrative is focalised through her point of view, the unremarkableness of this queer kinship is extended to the reader also.

Jaida’s view of family is expansive. She embodies a queer ethos that welcomes the growing unplannedness of family, knowing that she, herself, was the result of an unplanned pregnancy. Oscar and Rae both share with her stories that reflect their queer valuing of
chosen kin as family (indeed for each of them it is a matter of survival and necessity), and she absorbs this message with the kind of naive optimism of one who has had neither the need nor opportunity to choose her family, but is, nevertheless, excited to do so:

Sometimes she lay awake thinking about all the people she hadn’t met yet, and how some of them might be family. It was exciting not knowing who you’d find, and when. Oscar used to say that people find each other like bits of broken glass on the beach, and then over time they smooth each other’s edges, create something unexpected and beautiful in its way, a sort of mosaic that’s never quite finished.

(151-152)

For Jaida, there is no scarcity around ideas of family and belonging. Her expansiveness extends to her pet goat, Guinevere, who at one point (in a letter to Oscar’s sister Nancy) she describes as one-fifth of her family (162). And perhaps because blood is not valued over the love of those who are present in her life, she does not get hung up on the question of paternity, playfully referring to her biological father (whom she does not know) as “mystery sperm man” (68, 198). Even her relationship with best friend Troy, whose family is close with Jaida’s family, might be read as a kind of kinship if one chooses to to read it that way.

This brings me to a reiteration of the role readers play in interpreting the text in their own ways, on their own terms. As mentioned above, in my writing (as much as I know how) I make a point of leaving narrative spaciousness for processes of subjective readerly meaning-making to occur. There are questions concerning familial relationality, within the novel, that I deliberately leave unanswered, and indeed, there are questions to which I am not entirely certain of the answer, (and because the reader only gets to know the world of the novel through Jaida’s observations and point of view, there are things that get left out
because they are simply not relevant to her thought processes). The relationship between Rae and Larissa is a romantic partnership, they appear to be a coupled core within the text, and well may they be. But there is nothing to suggest that they are, or have always been, monogamous. The nature of the relationship between Rae and Oscar, too, is open to various interpretations. There is more than twenty years’ difference between them, and yet, at some point before Jaida was born “they had made the decision to be each other’s family and had built the house together” (14), and then when Rae and Larissa got together a few years later, Oscar built himself a room off the side of the house and they all continued living together as family. Of course there is more to what happened than this skeleton of a description, and yet this is how the story has worked its way out over time and so this is how Jaida knows it. It is not my business to set down every detail about what these fictional adult relationships have been or are, but I do make the overall choice to show that the nature of family—as it is embodied by this family—cannot be “understood as a static and accomplished fact” *(Undoing Gender 29)* but rather is specific, and contingent, and always in a state of becoming.

Over the course of writing and rewriting the novel I am constantly reminded of the double-edge of language, particularly around familial words used to title people and relationships. I have learned that there is a necessary spaciousness that comes with writing queer ways of knowing and being—and indeed, that gaps and absences in the text sometimes say more than language ever could. Trans writer and activist, S. Bear Bergman, in his book *Blood, Marriage, Wine and Glitter*, suggests that “whatever’s not culturally valued doesn’t get its own words” (32), which certainly is a kind of truth, and one that can be witnessed in the lack of respect and rights afforded by the state (and by public discourse) to those in
certain kinds of non-biological, non-marriage based relationships. However, and as Bergman later explains, there is also immense power in this impossibility of language to firmly and empirically name, and many queers embrace this unsettledness as an opportunity to resist normalization and swim freely in the slipstream of liminality. Some will forge new words to better express their queer ways of being (words like “niblet” as a non-gendered term for nephew/niece, and “spunkle” for a sperm-donor uncle type relationship) but these are contingent and specific rather than universalised terms—the meaning, importantly, does not have to be settled once and for all.

In my own day-to-day life, as I try to describe my blended/chosen family to co-workers and strangers, I often feel myself pushing at the limits of language. My partner and I are married, but they (my partner prefers the pronoun they) are neither my “husband” nor my “wife”—we could use the non-gendered word spouse, but for something less formal we have to call upon our imaginations. Similarly, there is not a term to describe the relationship I have to my step-son’s other parents who we continue to actively do family with. And then, by extension, the relationship I have to their child, my step-son’s little sister who is so dear to me. And how will she describe her relationship with the baby that I am presently growing in my uterus? (For the moment she’s going with ‘sister’). The list goes on… These people are my family and yet the names we have in our English language do not, cannot, adequately fit with who we are to each other—and, for the most part, I find this to be queerly affirming.

In turning to the novel, we see Jaida’s focalised description of Oscar as her “favourite person in all the world…who’d loved her and grown her up since the day she was born” (19), and yet, one of the challenges (and delights) of writing this intergenerational relationship was the impossibility of naming it. It was clear to me that Oscar was a kind of ‘uncle’ figure to
Jaida—but, as he explains to Jaida, the gendered binary of the word “hung off him like an ill-fitting suit” (14). I considered “grumple” for a while, a playful derivative of gender-grumpy uncle, but in the end, something about their relationship resisted categorization all together, and so I decided to leave off a title—and simply went with “Oscar”. On reflection, it seems to me that the history of Oscar’s character—all the struggles he went through to survive and live well and do family on his own fluid terms—would be undermined if I persisted in this attempt at naming, clumsily imposing my writerly words on his uncompromisingly queer way of being and relating. Perhaps, like Jaida, I am learning to listen better for the power and beauty of queer subjectivity as it is—a relational and particular knowing, an unnameable process of becoming, a spacious embodiment of “new modes of reality” that challenge our perceptions of self, world and text.

2.3 Storytelling: The Art of Queer Survival

“Okay, so tell me something. A story. Something true from when you were young in Tasmania. I don’t want it to end with you carried off by a horse-riding fairy called Niamh—or a dragon.”

“So you don’t believe in dragons any more—?”

“Oscar!”

“Okay. Fine. I will tell you a story about when I was a bushranger.”

“That doesn’t sound true.”

“But what is truth but the stories that come from our desire to remember and our willingness to forget.” (Jaida 177)
Contemplating the complexity of words, naming, identity and representation, Gabrielle Owen writes, “as language fails to be who we are, it also stands in for us, calls us into being” (“Toward” 114). As I have reflected throughout this essay, language is productive and reductive; it both shapes our realities and limits them too. Words have the power to hurt and to heal, to connect the past with the present, and when wielded with imagination and intent, they can give voice to a future only dreamed of. As such, fantasy has become well recognised by queer scholars as a productive means through which to enact change; in Butler’s words, it is “part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility” (Undoing Gender 28). Fantasy lays claim to reality as a flexible site and, when embodied, points the way forward toward (as yet) unrecognised modes of being and knowing; it is a lifeline to the future and a concrete agent for queer survival.

Storytelling, an “embodied practice” (Boyd and Ramirez 8) of fantasy, is a theme that runs through Jaida, tying various plotlines together. It is the liminal and intersubjective place in which fiction and fact, lived experience and the memory of it, imaginings and reality converge and push at the limits of truth. It is the means by which Jaida’s (idyllic) present is contextualised within the felt knowledges of Oscar’s past, and it is also the place where better futures are dreamed of, and (in some cases) made real. While there is much to say about storytelling in relation to queer possibilities within the text, I will limit my discussion, primarily, to two fields related to fantasy and queer survivability. First, I will consider storytelling as an intergenerational means for honouring and maintaining (the personal and collective) queer histories and felt knowledges that so often have been silenced from, and left out of, official versions of history. And second, I will reflect on the embodied performativity
of Oscar’s storytelling, as a necessary disruption of “settled knowledge and knowable reality” (*Undoing Gender* 27) and a means for imagining and realising a queer new world.

It was important for me, in choosing to tell a story that focuses on a contemporary intergenerational relationship, that queer history and queer memory be given a central role in anchoring and influencing the unfolding events of the present. As is the case in many subaltern or historically undervalued communities, queer stories have been systematically left out of the history books, and, in some cases, erased. This is not to say that these histories have not been passed down, in non-canonical fashion, queer to queer. Hugh Ryan, creator of The Pop-Up Museum of Queer History, writes of this kind of “horizontal transmission” that occurs when a community does not have access to traditional institutions for passing down information through generations: without the vertical structures of “churches, schools, knowledgeable and supportive birth families,” he writes, queer history has been less of a “straight narrative” and more of a “spider web of facts, legends and rumours” (85). It is these tangential and liminal aspects of queer history and the transmission of it that I am most interested in exploring in my writing of *Jaida*.

To engage with queer oral histories is to move beyond a desire for a fixed hold on truth, and to embrace the possibilities that come from listening to a person’s retelling of events—heeding closely what they choose to tell, how they tell it, and what they leave out. The telling of one’s history, in the form of a story, is an intersubjective experience—not just between the teller and the listener—but also for the individual who is moving “back and forth between self and other, between the past and its memory” (Prager 108) as they make sense of, and reinterpret, their lives from within their current context. For Oscar, even prior to his Alzheimer’s diagnosis, memory has always been treated as a malleable springboard for a
“but what is truth,” he is fond of saying whenever Jaida accuses him of exaggerating or decorating his past, “but the stories that come from our desire to remember and our willingness to forget” (177). Oscar, whose early life involved traumatic events including surviving and escaping from a psychiatric hospital when he was nineteen, knows that any claim made on empirical knowledge or factual truth is illusory. His experience, as someone who has been objectified and othered by society, has taught him the power of language to define, and/or withhold, subjectivity. Thus, when Oscar wields words to tell Jaida stories, he taps into collective memory as a means to reconstruct and revision traumatic events, drawing on folktales as well as his imagination to explore and make sense of his affectual knowledge, without actually detailing what is, perhaps, too painful to speak.

Among the many fantastical stories Oscar tells through flashback in the novel, is one about Niamh, (the fairy woman from his mother’s Irish legends), who rides on the back of a dragon and frees hundreds of prisoners from a castle dungeon—prisoners who, he says, have been “locked away for nothing much—for not being polite, or singing too loud, or refusing to fight, or sometimes for reminding their families of things that their families [don’t] want to be reminded of” (97). In this, as in many of his stories, Oscar is indirectly telling his own story imprisonment and escape. He is using creative analogy to address the remembered feeling of being derealised as a person within his own family and society. His fantastical treatment of lived experience, not only underscores the violence done to himself, but also addresses the collective experiences of queers throughout history who have been degraded, punished, and killed, on the grounds of refusing to comply to normative expectations of gender and sexuality.
Throughout the novel, Oscar imaginatively situates the present in relation to the past, utilising storytelling as a political tool for a personal coping and healing from trauma, while queerly implicating a broader socio-historical context of myth and collective memory into the process. He does this, notably, without ever naming directly, or giving details, specifically, to the experiences that befell him while he was forcibly held as a patient in the psychiatric hospital. The reader, however, is positioned to bring outside knowledge (or perhaps will be prompted to do some research) that begin to place his life and stories within the context of history. It is not irrelevant to note, for example, that there is a long (and recent) history of medical interventions (lobotomies, electro-convulsion techniques, and sterilization by surgery, to name a few) and so-called ‘gay aversion therapies’ that have been exacted on queer bodies as a means to convert or halt queer tendencies, and that some of these interventions were still used in 1966 at Tasmania’s Royal Derwent Hospital (the real life institution around which I based Oscar’s experiences). Neither is it of no small consequence that the American Psychiatric Association (and also the Australian Medical Association) declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973—this was seven or eight years after Oscar’s forced admittance to the hospital. We see Jaida, as she pieces together some of the lived realities embedded within Oscar’s stories, gaining a new understanding of Oscar as she recognises for the first time the potential violence that a female-bodied, crossdressing, girl-kissing, war-resisting teenager may have been exposed to within certain historical contexts. “What would the world do with a girl who didn’t want to be a girl? A world fifty years younger than this one? A small town world?” (118) she asks herself. The answers to these questions are never precisely answered in the text, but are, nevertheless, there in the gaps and absences of Oscar’s storytelling.
In a very real way, as the novel unfolds, Jaida is given the opportunity to anchor and contextualise her own idyllic experiences of queerness and queer family within a broader history of queer struggle. As she learns more about Oscar’s personal story of survival and resilience as a transgender person born into a world (and, to a certain extent, a family) that would do him harm, she is brought to a new understanding of oppressive realities experienced not just in the past, but as an experience and impact that lives on in the present. She is learning that her everyday world, in which queerness and queer family are accepted and celebrated, is the result of rights and recognitions fought for and won—and also, to a certain extent, is realising that the struggle is not yet over and that she is implicated in this struggle. As Sarah Ahmed reminds us, “the past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present” (33), and for Jaida, this means, discovering the power of stories to weave a non-linear path between what has happened, what is happening, and finally, to begin to connect these to the world-building potentiality of what will happen.

It is important to me, in writing a story that deals with a transgender character’s traumatic history, that I find a way to make a break from the victimizing tendency (in fiction and in the media) to contain queer narratives to an inevitably tragic arc (Wickens 149). The story of the transgender subject who is rejected by their family of origin and persecuted by the state (Bergman 32), or who is miserable because they are born into the “wrong body” (Truit), are decontextualized tropes played over and over with little space given to the diversity of experiences that inform a life. Stories of courage, resilience, and joy—about strong community ties and chosen family—might equally be told as trans-narratives, and I tried to show Oscar’s life in relation to all these aspects and more. While Oscar’s past does
include trauma, the trauma does not define him, and indeed I try to show how he reclaims and actively constructs his subjectivity through creatively re-storying history on his own terms through embodied acts of fantasy—that is to say, through storytelling.

For Oscar, “the struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy” (*Undoing Gender* 29), and we see him, throughout the novel (even from within a state of dementia) calling on stories to make sense of the world about him, challenge the limits of oppressive realities, and also to create for himself a better and a safer life, where he does not have to compromise (so much) on his queer ways of being. “I sometimes think he went and made a fairy tale come true,” writes Nancy, Oscar’s younger sister, in a letter to Jaida. “If there is magic in this world, Oscar knows where to find it” (277). Nancy is referencing the way in which Oscar, in escaping Tasmania and forging a new life (and family) on a small island on the other side of the pacific, created a whole new reality for himself that had much in common with the mythical stories that their Irish mother told them when they were young. Tír na nÓg, known also as the Island of Eternal Youth, was a dreamed about place from these stories, a kind of utopia, and one that, as an adult, Oscar continuously weaves into a personal mythology of escape and renewal. “We are there now. This island is Tír na nÓg…” (99) he tells Jaida when she is six (as seen through a flashback), and so passes on to her this mythology of hope—linking the imagined with the real—just as his mother had passed it on to him when he was a child.

In *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner suggests that the “totalizing tendency” of heteronormativity “can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world” (8). The side by side placement of the words actively and imagining invite a collapse of the binary that traditionally separates the head from the rest of the body, it
connotes a kind of embodied-dreaming, a performance, a role-playing, a physical rendering, in which need and desire conspire to make real, through repetition and reworking, “new modes of reality”—indeed, *queer* modes of reality. Jaida, watching Oscar slipping in and out of states of dementia, learns over time to look beyond his words to find him, and instead begins to recognise his whole body as an expression of who he is and what he has been through. Oscar’s whole life has been an embodiment of *impossibility* as he has repeatedly performed transgressions of societal norms. He has never lived according to arbitrary categories, and indeed has revelled in the performativity of repeatedly situating his body within unnameable and fluid spaces, as an act of necessity, an act of defiance, and also as an act of coming home. In this sense, his body has also always been a site of *possibility*, a dynamic process of becoming, and becoming, and becoming—it is its own kind of fantasy, one that pushes at the bounds of reality through embodiments of a desire to be free.

Towards the end of the novel, Jaida comes to recognise that even though Oscar’s mind is no longer “working” in the rational sense of the word, that his body-mind and body-memory, continue to exist as queerly as ever. She reflects on his continuing transformation through the experience of Alzheimer’s Disease:

That body of his, and all its old knowings! The cauliflower of his brain might be shrinking, and the seahorse at the centre coming undone, but still his body was its own story—every muscle and movement belonging to some memory or experience or both. A kind of storehouse… A strong house… He was not lost in his body. His body was his home. (Jaida 291)

Jaida reframes her way of understanding Oscar’s transformation, through the impact of Alzheimer’s Disease, from one of tragedy, to one of process, and seeks out ways that she can
revel with him (beyond the confines of language which never really fit anyway) and to continue their relationship as one filled with meaning and love. As she steps into the role of storyteller, she is positioned as someone who is beginning to know the possibilities of the body to actualise fantasy, and to recognise this as a political and powerful world-building tool. My hope is that the reader, too, will seek revelling and rebellion in the stories we can tell ourselves and each other—with our words and with our bodies—about who we are and who we can be, beyond the realities to which we think we are confined.
Chapter 3: Concluding Thoughts

In *Undoing Gender*, when Judith Butler writes, “[p]ossibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread” (29), she is referring to what she sees as the necessary relationship between survival and the *thought* of what is possible. If one’s language and culture does not affirm one’s way of being and knowing, then the chances are one will largely go unrealised within society—an *impossibility* within the lexicon of our times and our people. In short, the norms of recognition at play at any given moment will often dictate whether or not a person can be recognised as human and *real* within that societal context. But norms of recognition are not fixed, and indeed, it is the political work of queer fantasy, embodied, to show “how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can be instituted” (29). Queer ways of identifying, representing, doing family, doing sex, doing desire, stretch the bounds of collective imagination and provide the life-giving means for reconfiguring notions of possibility.

The challenge I set myself, in writing this novel, is to create a story in which the impossibility of a singular truth or worldview might come to be understood as a productive space from which to engage with the possibilities of multiple, shifting, diverse and paradoxical realities. I didn’t wish to simply write a story about same-sex relationships and LGBT identity, but rather to explore—through character, theme, and even through structure—queer ways of knowing and being. I wanted to tell a story that invites debate about the nature and politics of realness, and that prompts the reader to explore, not just the world of the text, but their own world—questioning the ways in which their own identities have been socially constructed, and situating their lives within the richness of histories left out of the history books.
These are exciting times, as queer stories are increasingly being integrated into the mainstream by way of a myriad of TV shows (Will and Grace; Grace and Frankie; and Transparent, to name a few) and blockbuster movies the likes of Milk (2008), The Imitation Game (2014), and Carol (2016). As positive as this recognition of queer lives is, it is vital to remain vigilant in continuing to tell all the other stories and histories that are not so seductive and accessible to the hetero-dominant gaze. It is perhaps more important than ever, to share and keep alive all the weird, perverse, radical and liminal stories of queerness—the “spider web of facts, legends and rumours” (Ryan 85) of our histories. It is time to listen to and set down—not as empirical truth, but as affectual and effecting knowledges—the stories of those who have come before us, whose subjective perspectives and memories and silences continue to weave the queer understory for our present day canopy of expression, identity and experience. I can only hope that Jaida—this fictional novel that merges fantasy, memory and lived experience—might somehow contribute to our queer non-canon of stories that lay claim to reality, push against prevailing norms, resist assimilation, and invite readers to step playfully and politically into the inbetween.
Works Cited


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