

# SPEAKING SECRETS

*How are untellable stories told?*

*Sue Joseph*

## **Abstract**

*Speaking Secrets* is a manuscript that explores voicelessness and the media. It focuses on sexuality secrets and explores what happens when they become public property. Each chapter is a piece of literary journalism, a genre used to explore intimately stories which - because they are untellable - fell between the lines of mainstream journalism. The bigger picture has always been in our written and known political histories; the research sets out to make these histories and issues personal. It also sets out to examine the role of the 'false friend' component of journalism practice.

Two of the subjects – Lyn Austin and Jan Ruff O'Herne - are not only framed by the research criteria of the media, but because of who they are and what has happened to them at certain points in their lives, their stories are markedly significant, both historically and politically.

Both women personalise atrocious political moments in history. This paper sets out to re-tell their stories, and in that re-telling, demonstrate that the decades they were silent were just a hiatus, simmering beneath Australian and international media outlets - their voices ultimately, had to be heard. But at what personal cost to them? And why did they speak?

Finally, re-telling their stories through the medium of a book is an evocative means of recording and remembering, fleshing out moments of known national and international histories – a collective grouping of stories, making each all the more powerful.

The manuscript *Speaking Secrets*, seeks to collate a number of separate pieces of literary journalism about voicelessness within the media. The ‘secrets’ relate to sexuality and sexual matters. It endeavours to investigate the complex relationship between writer and subject – the false friend component - and discover what makes a story untellable. And then, how are they finally able to be told.

Sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman writes: ‘...some experiences are extremely difficult to speak about. Political conditions constrain particular events from being narrated. The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from awareness. Survivors of political torture, war and sexual crimes silence themselves and are silenced because it is too difficult to tell and to listen.’ (1993:3)

Over the decades, story by story, the media has slowly dismantled social taboos. As a result, new discourses have emerged and many people – previously unheard – have finally been heard as less stigma is attached to particular issues.

Many of the interviewees in *Speaking Secrets* are such people.

*Speaking Secrets* contains 10 interviews with people: some well known, some less well known and some not known at all. All interviewees were silenced or unable to tell their secret stories for various and varied reasons. But finally, each one of them found themselves reaching out to the media to disclose. Their reasons are as diverse as they are personal.

Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt claim: ‘The mass media are the only institution which can provide a space for public debate in modern society.’ (Livingstone et al, 1994: 2)

Interestingly, as a symbolic Fourth Estate, that is exactly where each interviewee reached out to tell their untellable stories.

These subjects were not solicited. The subjects put themselves out from behind their personally constructed walls of secrecy into the public domain. The research sought to discover how and why people are silenced, by asking people who had been silenced throughout their lives about the process. The research also sought to give them a voice again – allowing them to speak and tell their stories in their own words.

The manuscript delves into people’s lives and asks questions about their most haunting and secret sexual traumas and memories, and how and when they finally spoke about them.

These people are: Uniting Church leader Dorothy McRae-McMahon, of her public coming out at the 1999 Church forum; former international casting agent Liz Mullinar, following her near death illness and discovery of childhood sexual abuse at the age of five, memories she had expunged for decades; David Cunningham, the NSW Greens Party convenor and physically disabled, and his need and desire for some sort of fulfilling sex life; Michelle

Tess, a young lawyer, brutally abused by a family member from the age of eleven to fifteen; Russel Sykes, son of black activist Dr Roberta Sykes, on his discovery at the age of 30 that he was the product of a gang rape of his then 18-year-old mother – it was a race crime and she was left for dead; Jenny Mendick and her desire to claim a space for women who have had mastectomy but choose not to have prosthesis – her virtual gagging from the breast cancer community because of her stance; Rachael Wallbank, a sexually reassigned lawyer who took on the Australian Attorney-General against the Commonwealth – and won the right for sexually reassigned people to marry; academic Jim Malcolm, who married at 20 even though he had been having sex with men for years – he regarded himself as bisexual, finally leaving his wife and three children, more than a decade later; Lyn Austin, the first Stolen Generation survivor to receive financial compensation for the systematic physical, sexual and emotional abuse she sustained, once removed from her family as a 10 year old; and finally, war crime victim Jan Ruff O-Herne, brutally raped by hundreds of Japanese military in the last few months of World War 2 in Indonesia.

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This paper looks briefly at the ‘false friend’ component of the profession of journalism. The relationship between the subject and the journalist is crucial to any reflection on the craft of journalism. Writer Janet Malcolm takes one case history in her seminal text *The Journalist and the Murderer*. Published in 1990, Malcolm’s book does more damage to the (already quite damaged) name, reputation and profession of journalism and journalists than any text has done in the past. The opening lines of the book position her immediately: ‘Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible.’ (1990:3)

Philip Weiss in *Newsday*<sup>1</sup> wrote at the time: ‘If Janet Malcolm had blown up an ink factory, forcing the presses to shut down for a week, she couldn’t have sparked greater outrage in the media kingdom. (Weiss, 1990: 24)

If Malcolm is guilty of one thing, it is hyperbole in those first few lines of her book. Perhaps it was intentional because it has certainly kept her in the forefront of mainstream journalism analysis and education. Over the past 15 years, Malcolm has been frequently cited in discussions surrounding journalistic ethics and practice. But most striking is her ultimate conclusion: namely that the relationship between journalist and interview **is** a relationship, and both parties have something to do with its dynamic and reality. In the relationship, Malcolm places the greater responsibility on the journalist. However she concedes that

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<sup>1</sup> *Newsday*, February 18, 1990

subjects also play a part in the dance, albeit a mostly compromised part: ‘The subject’s side of the equation is not without its moral problems, either.’ (Malcolm, 1990: 143)

Public reaction to Malcolm’s text was immediate. Perhaps it is the hyperbolic nature of her initial statement which sent self-righteous shudders through the industry. After all, Joan Didion effectively argued the same thing, if less eloquently, 22 years earlier when she wrote in the forward of her acclaimed modern classic *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*<sup>2</sup>: ‘Writers are always selling somebody out.’

Nat Hentoff writes in *Editor and Publisher*<sup>3</sup> (Hentoff, 2001: 26) that criticism is ‘endemic’ to the profession. Malcolm’s seemed to ratify public perception that journalists are no more to be trusted than second hand used car salesmen and creates a standard with no expectation of attaining. But her text is much more than just this, although this is the popular grab most often taken from it.

Book reviews at the time of publication varied. *The Wall Street Journal*’s<sup>4</sup> Andrew Ferguson wrote: ‘...Ms Malcolm considers this relationship paradigmatic, when in fact it is far slimmer than anything that normally obtains between journalist and subject’ (Ferguson, 1990, A22).

Across the Atlantic, Linda Christmas from *The New Statesman*<sup>5</sup> explains that Malcolm set out to write about the relationship between subject and journalist or author. She wrote: ‘If that was her aim, she should not have restricted herself to one example. And a *bad* example at that.’ (Christmas, 1991:35)

Catharine Stimpson<sup>6</sup> reviewed Malcolm with a seemingly greater insight. She writes of the book: ‘It offers little consolation to writers of some integrity...such writers do what they must, but some blood will fleck the keyboards of even the wisest among them.’ (Stimpson, 1990: 902)

And this is the thrust of Malcolm’s text that is often overlooked by a knee-jerk reaction to her opening lines – ignored both by the public and industry. And that is that there **is** a relationship, and that within the relationship both the writer and the subject are after, and will obtain, something from the coupling. What they get may be celebrity, financial, revenge, altruism, a semblance of justice, or just some way of being heard. Whatever it is, the subject of every solicited story seeks to gain something or else they would not be there in the first place. It is the balance of methods used, the depth of honesty imposed and believed, from both sides, which tips the balance. The integrity of both writer and subject is on show to be

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<sup>2</sup> *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1968, xvi

<sup>3</sup> *Editor and Publisher*, September 3, 2001

<sup>4</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, (Eastern edition) 1990

<sup>5</sup> *New Statesman & Society*, 1991

<sup>6</sup> *The Nation*, 1990, 899

judged. Janet Malcolm's text is a key case raising questions and themes which must be constantly discussed, to maintain a semblance of honesty about what is the exact nature of journalism.

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Malcolm's story *Reflections: The Journalist and the Murderer*, in the form of extended essay. It first appeared as a two-part article in the March 13 and 20, 1989 issues of *The New Yorker*. This was at the conclusion of a six week jury trial brought against writer Joe McGinniss<sup>7</sup>. Convicted of triple murder 10 years earlier and serving three consecutive life sentences, Jeffrey MacDonald brought a lawsuit in 1984 against McGinniss for fraud and breach of contract pertaining to McGinniss's book of his crimes, *Fatal Vision*<sup>8</sup>. His case finally went to trial in 1987. The jury was hung (five to six) and a settlement of US\$325,000 was paid to MacDonald's side, although he didn't see much of it. As Malcolm points out, five of the six jurors believed that a man convicted for the homicide of his pregnant wife and two young daughters deserved greater sympathy than a man who wrote about it. (Malcolm, 1990:6)

Malcolm's point is that Joe McGinniss acted like he thought MacDonald was innocent, in order to get the story. She describes this as a 'morally indefensible' stand. From the way McGinniss behaved, responded and wrote to him, MacDonald believed he was his friend. He also believed McGinniss believed him to be innocent of the crimes.

McGinniss met MacDonald in California in June 1979. He was there at the time as a guest columnist for the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*. He noticed an article in the local paper about a doctor about to be tried for the triple murder of his family. Jeffrey MacDonald's 26 year old wife Colette MacDonald, who was pregnant, five year old Kimberly and two year old Kristen had been stabbed and beaten to death in their Fort Bragg apartment, nine years earlier on February 17, 1970. (Malcolm, 1990:15) MacDonald, who was a doctor for the Green Beret stationed at Fort Bragg Army base in North Carolina, was charged and then acquitted of the murders by a seven month long army tribunal.

A year later, his wife's step-father Alfred Kassab, urged the Justice Department to reopen the case, which it did, indicting him in 1975 and finally re-trying him in 1979. He was found guilty.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Selling of the President*, 1968; *The Dream Team*, 1972; *Heroes*, 1976; *Going to Extremes*, 1980; *Fatal Vision*, 1983; *Blind Faith*, 1989; *Cruel Doubt*, 1991; *The Last Brother*, 1993; *The Miracle of Castel di Sangro*, 1999; *The Big Horse*, 2004

<sup>8</sup> *Fatal Vision*, Putnam's, New York, 1983

After one meeting with McGinniss prior to the retrial, MacDonald invited him into the defence team arena in order to write a book. This gave him full access to MacDonald, his lawyers, all strategies and all game plans running up to the trial and during the trial in Raleigh, North Carolina. And following his conviction on August 29, 1979, McGinniss had four more years exclusively with MacDonald via tape recordings, letters and prison visits. As part of the deal, McGinniss received complete exclusivity and release from liability. MacDonald was to receive 26.5 percent of the advance and 33 percent of royalties in order to pay his large legal fees. (Malcolm, 1990:19) MacDonald's lawyer at the time, Bernard Segal, qualified the agreement on liability. He added to the contract before it was signed '...provided that the essential integrity of my life story is maintained' (Malcolm, 1990: 21). And it was this caveat that was the entire basis of MacDonald's lawsuit against McGinniss.

There is no doubt Jeffrey MacDonald was looking towards Joe McGinniss and his book as a form of exoneration of the crimes he was convicted of. And here is where the 'false friend' comes into play. Indeed, MacDonald's counsel used the analogy in his opening statement at the fraud trial of McGinniss: 'It is a case about a false friend.' (Malcolm, 1990: 45)

MacDonald trusted him. At no time was he given any idea that McGinniss did not believe him. Malcolm writes: 'In common with many other subjects and writers, they clothed their complicated business together in a mantle of friendship.' (Malcolm, 1990: 23)

Instead of the exoneration MacDonald was expecting, Joe McGinniss's *Fatal Vision* depicted him as a cold-blooded and psychotic killer, who had taken too many diet pills and went berserk on the night, slaughtering his young family. To make matters worse, MacDonald only discovered the duplicity when he appeared on *60 Minutes* (US) from prison in 1983 when he happily agreed to some pre-publication publicity for the book. Mike Wallace read aloud some passages from an advance copy of *Fatal Vision*. This was the first time MacDonald realised McGinniss thought he had committed the crimes and had been stringing him along for years. Malcolm writes: '...the camera recorded his look of shock and utter discomposure.' (Malcolm, 1990:31)

Joe McGinniss told Malcolm after the lawsuit against him: 'MacDonald was clearly trying to manipulate me, and I was aware of it from the beginning. But did I have an obligation to say, wait a minute. I think you are manipulating me, and I have to call your attention to the fact that I'm aware of this, just so you'll understand you are not succeeding? Do little bells have to go at a certain point? This has never been the case before. This could inhibit any but the most superficial reporting....' (Malcolm,1990:17)

As Linda Christmas<sup>9</sup> wrote, perhaps Malcolm has chosen a very bad example – the worst possible deception of a subject - to hold the craft of journalism and the ethics and integrity of journalists up against. MacDonald's case was damning of McGinniss. MacDonald's people produced letters written to him in prison by McGinniss, repeatedly emphasising his solidarity with the convicted man and desire that he be free again.

Two of the defence team's witnesses – well known writers William F. Buckley Jr<sup>10</sup> and Joseph Wambaugh<sup>11</sup> - were cross examined by MacDonald's lawyer Gary Bostwick and produced what was later deemed the pivotal moment of the trial. When Buckley was asked by Bostwick if he would 'tell him something you don't really believe in order to get more information' (Malcolm, 1990: 53) he replied: 'Yes. That is right, understood in context.' (ibid)

When Wambaugh explained his difference between a lie and an untruth – 'a lie is something that's told with ill will or in bad faith that is not true' while an untruth is 'part of a device wherein one can get at the actual truth' (Malcolm, 1990: 54), Bostwick had all he needed for his closing address to the jury.

He told the jury the defence's argument, told by experts, was to do 'whatever is necessary' to get the story – even lie to the subject.

As the crux of the story, Malcolm takes this and tarnishes all journalists and the business of journalism. Her assumption is that the art of journalism, or the craft or the profession just by its nature, 'lies' to subjects in order to get their stories. However she also places some of this responsibility on the subject. She writes: 'Unlike other relationships that have a purpose beyond themselves and are clearly delineated as such (dentist-patient, lawyer-client, teacher-student), the writer-subject relationship seems to depend for its life on a kind of fuzziness and murkiness, if not utter covertness, of purpose. If everybody put his cards on the table, the game would be over. The journalist must do his work in a kind of deliberately induced state of moral anarchy. This is what Buckley and Wambaugh were trying to say in court...if they had put it as a baffling and unfortunate occupational hazard rather than a virtual necessity, they might not have antagonised the jury as they did.' (Malcolm, 1990:143)

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<sup>9</sup> *New Statesman & Society*, 1991

<sup>10</sup> *National Review Magazine*

<sup>11</sup> *The New Centurions* (1971); *The Blue Knight* (1972); *The Onion Field* (1973); *The Choirboys* (1975); *The Black Marble* (1977); *The Delta Star* (1983); *The Glitter Dome* (1984); *Lines and Shadows* (1984); *The Secrets of Harry Bright* (1985); *Echoes in the Darkness* (1987); *The Bleeding* (1989); *The Golden Orange* (1990); *Fugitive Nights* (1992); *Finnegan's Week* (1993); *Floaters* (1996); *Fire Lover* (2002)

Debate has been raging about New Journalism – often called creative non-fiction, literary journalism or documentary journalism – ever since Tom Wolfe wrote an extended essay entitled *The birth of the new journalism, eyewitness report by Tom Wolfe*<sup>12</sup> in 1972. The book<sup>13</sup> later produced was an anthology of 23 pieces by some of the most remarkable writers<sup>14</sup> in America at the time. What was so startling about Wolfe’s stance was his insistence that fact and fiction are so alike. He identified that fictional technique can be used to relay fact, and posited that this sort of writing would replace the novel as it was known. However there is no denying that some of the most successful pieces of writing toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were exactly this: true life informed by fictional technique. These are the stories Hollywood then picks up and catapults even further into people’s lives – the stories of ordinary people, made extraordinary by what happens to them or how they conduct themselves or what they discover or where they are.

But exactly how ‘true’ are these facts – in the case of McGinniss’s *Fatal Vision*, a highly subjective question. The narrative process and the relationship, between the story gatherer and the story-teller often intersects in a jarring and confrontational experience, often hidden, infrequently overt. Choices are made by the story-teller (for example: how much to tell, what to leave out and how much to embellish) as well as the story gatherer (what to ask and what not to ask; what then to include and what not include). Journalism is about choices – as Wambaugh imparts ‘context’ is all important.

American literary journalist Floyd Skloot<sup>15</sup> says: ‘Creative non-fiction offers the engagement of good narrative fiction, with its emphasis on character, setting, and story; the intimacy, compression, and precision of poetry; information and fresh ideas as in good fiction; personal revelation as in memoirs; and the immediacy of journalism. It can be as tight or as baggy as the subject requires. It is a flexible, endlessly fresh form for the individual voice to explore.’ (Gutkind, 2005: 306)

The research for *Speaking Secrets* sets out to establish an overt relationship with each of its subjects and to create for the reader an evocative and believable space for their stories to be told and voices to be heard. Each story has been accompanied by rigorous research and fact

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<sup>12</sup> Thirteen page piece for the *New York* magazine

<sup>13</sup> Published by Picador as *The new journalism* by Tom Wolfe, with an anthology edited by Tom Wolfe and EW Johnson, 1973

<sup>14</sup> Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, Plimpton's *Paper Lion*, Thompson's *The Hell's Angels* and McGinniss's *The Selling of the President 1968*; Rex Reed on Ava Gardner, Michael Herr on Khe sanh, Joan Didion on the Miller murder case in California, Joe Eszterhas on the Missouri killings of Charlie Simpson, Terry Southern on the Dixie National Baton Twirling Institute in Mississippi.

<sup>15</sup> *Grey Area: Thinking with a Damaged Brain*, 2000

checking to allow a freer momentum for their voices. However, there is still a perception of false friendship about this process. It does not matter that each interviewee agreed to talk about deeply personal and sometimes traumatic memories, the question still arises as to what right the interviewer has to be there in the first place. During the majority of interviews conducted for the manuscript *Speaking Secrets*, it was necessary to ask the subject if they wanted to halt the interview because of their distress. However, somehow, the more upset or re-traumatised the subject became, the more evocative the telling became – clearly, a ‘morally indefensible’ stance. There is a fleeting intimacy established between story-teller and story gatherer – the false friend. It smacks of opportunistic potential at the time of interviewing but ends when the journalist walks out the door with what they came for, in the first place: the story. The question that must be asked is: what is left behind? Is it an empowered subject feeling they have achieved what they set out to achieve? Or is it a damaged person – re-traumatised - and wondering whether they have said too much and how it will be used and retold by this person who seemed so genuine and ‘friendly’ at the time? Trusting that the integrity of what has passed between them will be maintained but really, having no idea until it is seen or heard, after reproduction.

Another American literary journalist Norman Sims<sup>16</sup> regards this ‘false friend’ theory as a tool of the trade: ‘Personal engagement with the subject may not be there at first, but the job will be dreary and the result drab if something doesn’t develop...the liveliness of literary journalism, which critics compare to fiction, comes from combining this personal engagement with perspective from sociology and anthropology, memoir writing, fiction, history, and standard reporting....literary journalists are boundary crossers in search of a deeper perspective on our lives and times.’ (Sims, Kramer, 1995: 19)

Janet Malcolm writes of interviewing Lucille Dillon, the juror who could not agree to finding McGinniss guilty of fraud and breach of contract in the MacDonald/McGinniss lawsuit. Malcolm writes: ‘People tell journalists their stories as characters in dreams deliver their elliptical messages: without warning, without context, without concern for how odd they will sound when the dreamer awakens and repeats them. Here I sat, eating my Thanksgiving dinner with this stranger dressed in white, who I would never see again, and whose existence for me henceforth would be on paper, as a sort of emblematic figure of the perils of the jury system.’ (Malcolm, 1983:115)

This is of key relevance to the research. The subjects in the manuscript also are ‘emblematic’ figures. They represent individually not the perils of entrenched institutions but rather,

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<sup>16</sup> *The Art of Literary Journalism*, Literary Journalism, 1995

various societal taboos – rape, race, gender, homosexuality, disability, disease, child abuse, sexual reassignment – all impeded, repressed or silenced in some way by entrenched institutions.

Perhaps together within the community of the manuscript, they represent the perils of ignorance.

Sociologist Michel Foucault claimed that ‘truth, lodged in our most secret nature, demands only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can only finally be articulated at the price of a kind of liberation.’ (Foucault, 1976b: 60) There is an imperative to confess.

Twenty years later, University of Utah Professor Doug Birkhead, like so many media analysts, appropriates this theory and posits it directly at the feet of journalists. He claims that journalism: ‘reflects an impulse to bring events into a forum so that they may be publicly accounted for. The press traditionally has sought to make itself – and us – bear responsibility of being witnesses rather than merely onlookers.’ (Sims, Kramer, 1995: 13)

And Norman Sims again: ‘Literary journalists share a goal of bearing witness, and a certainty that there is more to common life than just politics.....Because personal experience illuminates political issues, literary journalists are likely to write about politics by letting individuals represent larger groups.’ (Sims, Kramer, 1995: 13)

Each interviewee in *Speaking Secrets* represents a ‘larger’ group, as Simms claims. For Lyn Austin, it is the Stolen Generation that Australia and Australians have been ducking and diving for decades. For Jan Ruff O’Herne, it is the collective of young women taken by Japanese soldiers and systematically sexually brutalised during World War 2. Rape as a tool of war.<sup>17</sup>

Each interviewee has been constrained, some for decades. So, how did they finally manage to speak up, and then why did they agree to speak to me? Is it the impetus to confess that Foucault wrote about? Or an imperative to have history bear witness? And how accurate is this cumulative social history produced by the Australian media? This random and then, not so random, collection of stories and broadcasts documenting and reflecting an ever-changing political and social landscape? How balanced is it? What is the best way of recording people’s stories? How do people tell particularly untellable stories when society, and the journalists themselves, not to mention the institution, often don’t want to hear or acknowledge? When the **politics** of a story represses it? What sort of patchy, inaccurate

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<sup>17</sup> International War Crime Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in February 1993, (ICTY) and the Tribunal for Rwanda, 1995 (ICTR).

history by media has been recorded throughout the years? A social history by media with huge, gaping holes in it but one that nevertheless, as reflected in the research, will get there in the end, with the strict understanding that there will never be an end....we will always be behind, trying to catch up and re-record what we missed in the past because of stultifying politics. We will always be trying to make up for appalling mistakes of omission.

This paper looks at two of the subjects from the manuscript *Speaking Secrets* – Lyn Austin and Jan Ruff O’Herne – and considers the process of story gathering and the relationship between author and story teller. What exactly did these subjects get from the telling of their stories? Is it in the interest of the public to hear these stories? Is there a right to know?

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The chapter on Lyn Austin in *Speaking Secrets* begins:

*I stare at the photo, nearly 40 years old. The ten year old, with the big brown eyes, stares right back. She smiles and I recognise it - the woman in front of me now still wears it. Sometimes.*

*In the photo, she holds a cup to her baby “sister” Merryn. Her other “sister”, six year old Judy holds the baby, while “sister” Susan looks on. They are dressed impeccably – they are clean, almost shiny.*

*But it was for the world to view, after all.*

*It was 1964 and Lyn Austin’s foster parents, Dorothy and Charles Shea, and their four natural children, Jennifer, Angus, Gilbert and Rosemary, were in the process of being lauded and feted by The Australian Women’s Weekly. Their story later appeared in the November 11 edition that same year. Entitled For Love of Aborigines with a sub-title, Farming family have quietly put a belief into practice - the Shea family paints a picture of gracious humanity, in the name of Christianity.*

*In the article, Dorothy Shea is described as: “.. a hardworking country woman who radiates kindness and calmness and a deep, understanding love for her children.”*

*Further in the article, Dorothy Shea explains: “Adopting Aboriginal children has brought great satisfaction into our lives, and what they give back to you – I count it as a privilege. There is no difference between them and say our own children.”*

*I study closely another family photo from the magazine, this, a photostat. It is the smiling face of a 14-year-old boy, standing next to his father. It is the Sheas’ second youngest natural child, Gilbert. He looks completely happy and untroubled, peering over the top of his mother’s head. A normal little boy, surrounded by his family. And I wonder why it is impossible to detect menace and danger in a look – how easy it is to disguise, even at such a*

*young age.*

*I read the words and examine the faces in the photographs. And I have never been so sure in my life that this type of journalism is pure performance. That what you see and read may never, ever be anywhere near what is really happening. And how dangerous it is to simply skim the surface of anyone's story. And I wonder about anything and everything I have ever written as a journalist. How the journalist who covered the Shea story did not just miss the story, but left four little girls endangered in a hell they have not, and will never, recover from.*

It sounds damning of the journalist. It is not meant to be. The context – historical and political – of the time precluded seeing the truth. The stories of the Stolen Generations were not disclosed for more than another 30 years.

Lyn Austin was 10 when she was taken from her mother Daphne Ruby. With three other younger Aboriginal girls, she was delivered to the Sheas, a good Christian family that lived on a beautiful Victorian rural property.

She was first raped on her 11th birthday by her 14 year old foster brother Gilbert Shea. He continued to rape her and her younger foster sisters for years.

They were also systematically flogged by their foster mother Dorothy Shea, who had a stockpile of straps and leather whips hanging in the laundry.

Austin escaped from the Shea family home as soon as she could. She never told anybody of the sexual abuse, and just her best friend at school about the physical abuse. Twenty years after she left the Sheas, her foster sisters came looking for her, asking her questions. Like most survivors of childhood abuse, Austin had spent most of her life forgetting. But her sisters wanted answers - and they were determined to get them. As they dragged them from Austin, the injustice and the pain surfaced.

She says: *“And they wanted, they started asking questions, what had happened to them as children on the farm and talking about the abuse and that and then I thought oh God, why did you have to come now and you're digging up the past. I was happy to just let it go, you know, just sort of forget about it.*

*”But they wouldn't – they couldn't.*

*“I was really angry with them for looking for me to re-go through this all again. And I, you know, I was very bitter towards them actually,” she says.*

*“Well, they were starting to think about it, they started having nightmares and, and started remembering things and they started asking me to fill in the gaps, to tell them what had happened and things so, but oh, I just got so sick in the end. I, I did and you know I tried not*

*to sort of keep in touch with them and things because like I said, I was becoming quite ill out of it all.”*

The four women reported Gilbert Shea to the police.

It took five years for the police to investigate their allegations – a paper trail that fills folder upon folder in her home. Gilbert Shea completely denies all allegations of any sexual abuse of his foster sisters.

Austin remembers seeing Gilbert Shea at the committal proceedings: *“He was very calm and collected and casual. I mean, he was about to get up on the stand and lie through his teeth, that we were lying and making all this up and nothing ever happened so, he was very cool and calm.”*

When the case came to committal at the Geelong Magistrate’s Court on March 20, 1997, there was only enough evidence to commit Gilbert Shea to trial on one count pertaining to Austin – carnal knowledge of a girl 10-16.

However, the Victorian Director of Public Prosecutions decided to discontinue that prosecution because of the age of the offence.<sup>18</sup> He wrote: ‘You must not take the fact that the Magistrate did discharge the accused person to mean that you were not believed as a witness. Similarly, you should not view our decision to discontinue proceedings from the position of not being accepted as a witness of truth. This is far from the case. It is however necessary for the Crown to prove all elements of the case beyond reasonable doubt, something which we could not do in this particular case.’

Austin says: *“Yeah so, it’s only our word and our word wasn’t good enough. There was no medical records, evidence, there was nothing there, ever recorded.*

*“These people were very well known and very high profile people. So, you know, who’s going to believe a black kid, who was going to believe us anyway, even if we did talk about it years ago, no-one would have believed us back then.”*

The presiding magistrate apologised to Austin and her foster sisters and urged them to apply to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal<sup>19</sup>. This gave them a small victory, albeit only financial. Each of the women was awarded \$7,000 - the first financial compensation to indigenous people in Australia taken from their families.

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from Geoffrey Flatman, QC, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Victoria to Lyn Austin, June 10, 1977

<sup>19</sup> The Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT), Department of Justice, considers applications for financial assistance by victims of violent crime committed in Victoria.

Austin's solicitor then urged her and her sisters to pursue Gilbert Shea civilly in a court where the burden of proof is not 'beyond reasonable doubt'. But Austin and her sisters had had enough.

The day after Austin and her sisters received their compensation from the Victorian Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal was National Sorry Day in 1999, the second anniversary of the tabling of the *Bringing Them Home Report* in 1997<sup>20</sup> by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, chaired at the time by Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson and co authored with the late Sir Ronald Wilson.

The symbolism was not lost on Austin.

The following year Lyn Austin and her cousin organised a huge massed rally for the Stolen Generation. More than four thousand people marched and gathered, bringing Central Melbourne to a standstill.<sup>21</sup>

She remembered: *"We actually, we organised that white chrysanthemums be laid on the steps of Parliament.....that was to acknowledge past and present mothers that had their children taken.*

*"So, it was beautiful to just, you know, see a sea of white flowers on the steps of Parliament."*

Instead of thinking backwards, Austin is looking forward. She travels to schools and rallies, sharing her story and teaching young white Australia – those who will listen – a little of a past history very few have any idea existed.

I first met Austin in a Melbourne classroom having invited her into a postgraduate class, just before Sorry Day (Journey of Healing) 2000. All my students were deeply moved by her. All my students went on the march and rally.

Austin says: *"I was silenced as a child, but it's time to speak out. It is justification for my mother, for her to rest in peace."*

Her mother, Daphne Ruby – three weeks before Austin, then 17, left the Shea family home, she received word that her mother had died of a massive heart attack. Dorothy Shea refused to allow Austin to go to the funeral in Dimboola. Daphne Ruby was just 36.

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<sup>20</sup> The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was established in May 1995. The 700-page report of the 'Stolen Children' National Inquiry *Bringing them home*, was tabled in Federal Parliament on 26 May 1997.

<sup>21</sup> May 26, 2000

Austin says, as only someone suffering traumatic memory is able to: *“I was devastated, I was, you know, I thought oh, it was, it was devastatin’, ‘ cause I thought, you know, I wanted to go back and make up for all the lost years that I’d lost with her over the years and to go back and to be with her. You know, to try and make up for the years away from her.*

*“And, today I’m, you know I still, you know, think, you know, why, why, what happened...?”*

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In *Speaking Secrets*, the chapter on Jan Ruff-O’Herne begins:

*As the taxi pulls into the drive of her Adelaide bungalow, Jan Ruff-O’Herne opens her front door. She has been waiting.*

*“Come in. Welcome! Here, give me a hug....” She envelops me in her arms and it feels completely natural. Warm and natural and welcoming. And comforting, in a way. And interestingly, the comfort is also welcome because although I have been looking forward to meeting and talking to this woman, her story – her secret – is steeped in pain and terror and grief.*

*Jan Ruff-O’Herne does not and will never accept the term ‘comfort woman’.*

*“We were Japanese war rape victims.” She is emphatic. The final four syllables are spoken – no, spat, really - almost in staccato.*

*“Comfort means something warm and soft.” She shakes her head. “We were really military sex slaves.*

*She uses her hands a lot while talking. I detect a slight arthritis in her knuckles, but she disregards it, as she moves her hands almost constantly, for emphasis. There is still a strong accent – it is the hybrid Dutch-English-Indonesian combination, as she grew up in Java, speaking fluent Indonesian as well.*

*“It is - it’s hideous, because we were anything but comfort, you know.”*

The contempt the Japanese held these women in is reflected in something she says: *“They regarded us like their rations – just like their right to another packet of cigarettes.”*

Jan Ruff O’Herne was only 21 when she was dragged from her family to the notorious Virgin Brothels in Java, Indonesia. The euphemism ‘comfort woman’ is a translation of the Japanese *jugun ianfu* which means ‘military comfort women’. Estimates range from 50,000 to 200,000 women – about 100 were Dutch; the rest Asian women – taken by the Japanese military before and during World War 2 and forced into sexual enslavement by the military. The practise preceded World War 2 and was highly organised by the military which provided these comfort stations. Girls, as young as 12, were removed from their families and villages

and herded around with the troops for their sexual gratification. After the Japanese annexation of Korea<sup>22</sup>, most of the women were South Korean.

Ruff-O'Herne says: *"Sometimes when the soldiers had to retreat they didn't know what to do with the women - they used to just shoot them and leave them behind. And they're dead, most of them were just killed. I've been told that they would shoot them through the vagina, that was their favourite way to kill them."*

At the end of WW2, the British were sent into Java to protect the Dutch from the Indonesian independence movement which wanted them out. Tom Ruff was one of those British soldiers, and he and Ruff-O'Herne fell deeply in love. But Jan Ruff-O'Herne had her terrible secret.

She told Ruff what had happened to her. According to Ruff-O'Herne: *"He never interrupted me. And that story was only ever told once, it was never referred to again, it was never spoken about again, it was too much for him to cope with it. It was just too much. Tom just blocked it out."*

But he did insist they report the crimes to the British Embassy. They did. However, having relayed her ordeal, Ruff O'Herne says: *"To this day, I have heard nothing from them."*

When the Japanese released the young women from the Virgin Brothels, they were taken back to their families at various camps. However, within each camp they were segregated from the rest of the prisoners. Rumours abounded that some of the young Dutch women had willingly and gladly gone with the Japanese to service them sexually. The young women were also threatened by the Japanese that if they spoke of what had occurred within the Virgin Brothels, their families would be killed.

The silencing was like a vacuum, Ruff O'Herne says: *"We were told by the Japanese that we weren't to tell anybody and that was why in the beginning .....we were kept separate from the other women and children and so the other women in the camp thought that, all these rumours spread that all these young women, that we had been with the Japanese, that we were doing it voluntarily. And this was terrible, because your own people calling you whores, and throwing bricks over the fence with little messages attached to it and all that sort of thing and even when the war was finished and we could really mingle, you know, with all of the camp, we were called whores - we'd walk around and everyone thinks you're a whore. It was terrible, you just shut up, what can you say, what can you do, you know....."*

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<sup>22</sup> The Korea-Japan Annexation Treaty was signed on August 22, 1910 by the Korean and Japanese Imperial Governments

*again the silence was again forced upon us. That silence started by the Japanese was forced upon us again and then again by the shame.*

*“It was like another weapon, the silence. They enforced it upon us, right from the start, threatening us that if we were to tell anybody they would kill us and our families.”*

For 50 years, she maintained her silence. And then, while watching television one night in 1992, her whole life changed. She knew the vacuum could be broken. On television she saw a group of Korean women standing around one woman, Kim Hak Sung, who was telling of her own ordeal of systematic rape at the hands of the Japanese military.

Because her family had all died, she felt she could no longer shame them with what had happened and was finally able to speak up. While she was seeking compensation, she was primarily seeking an apology.

*“And she had this small group of other women around her and I thought ‘God, I should join those women and speak for them, if they have the courage to speak up’,”* Ruff-O’Herne says.

Ruff O’Herne knew she had to speak up. However she was conscious that she had not even told her own children. *“I had to tell them first. I had to tell them - how can you tell your daughters this sort of thing? And by that time I had grandchildren - how can you tell your grandchildren? Their grandmother, their Oma - there was never the right time. And my daughters grew up, it was never the right time, when they were children, it was just...but the same time I felt that I was going to do something with it, I wasn’t going to waste myself and once I speak out I’m going to use it and speak for the rest of the world to use it so that these things would never happen again, so that the campaign started in my head there and then that I was going to do something with it.*

*“But I had to tell my daughters, first.”* She couldn’t speak the words, so she wrote to her daughters.

Ruff O’Herne travelled to Tokyo and appeared at an international public hearing on Japanese war crimes, held in December 1992<sup>23</sup>. As Jan Ruff-O’Herne took to the podium and spoke, her words were transmitted by the media throughout the world. She described her first night of rape at the hands of a Japanese high-ranking officer.

She told the world: *“I felt like a hunted animal. I told him ‘I would rather die than give*

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<sup>23</sup> International Public hearing on the comfort women issue in Tokyo, the survivors from these countries spoke in an international audience for the first time, December 9 & 10, 1992. It was a historic event for it brought the ‘comfort women’ from seven countries together to share their stories and sufferings, and led to the setting up of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery in Tokyo from December 8-10, 2000

*myself to you'. He got out his sword and I said 'before you kill me, can I say a prayer'. He had paid a lot of money for that first night, because we were virgins, and I knew when he began to undress as I prayed, that he was not going to kill me - he never had the intention of killing me. This Japanese officer was in total control of the situation. I tried to fight him off but he was too strong.*

*"This was an inhuman and brutal rape, the first of hundreds....."*<sup>24</sup>

Ruff-O'Herne believed she could go to Tokyo, tell this story, and then resume her life back in South Australia

*"I was so naïve. This was an international public hearing and I didn't even realise that it would be on television all over the world. I thought I could go to Tokyo and get back here and nobody would ever know. I never told anybody here and of course it was world news, the whole world out there was with microphones pointing in front of my face, you know. And the whole world was there,"* she says.

Having spoken out, Ruff-O'Herne's life transformed. The triggers are still there but, like Lyn Austin, she has been able to turn her pain and fear and shame into something positive. She has now spoken out officially about rape as a weapon of war in The Netherlands, Japan, England, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, Bosnia, Jerusalem and here in Australia, mainly for the Red Cross.

However perhaps her greatest moment of triumph was in 1998 when three of eight Bosnian Serbs were charged with rape by the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in the Hague<sup>25</sup>.

Despite this, she says: *"The war never ended for me, you live with it for the rest of your life. There is always something that triggers it off, you know even at night, I still have it now, when I look through the window and it's getting dark - even now I sometimes still get the terrible fear running through my body, like electrical wires going through your body, this fear, because when it's getting dark it means getting raped over and over and over again and the fear that worked up, you know, in the house, in the brothel, I could see it getting dark, it*

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<sup>24</sup> Part of the statement Ruff O'Herne gave to the International Public Hearing on December 9, 1992. She was the fourth speaker.

<sup>25</sup> The June 6, 1996 indictment of 62 charges against eight men described the ordeal of 14 Muslim women in Foca, in Bosnia, some as young as 12. According to investigators rape was used in Bosnia as a strategy to terrorize people. The European Union investigators calculated that in 1992, 20,000 Muslim women and girls were raped by Serbs. Three of the accused were found guilty on February 21, 2001 and sentenced to 28, 20 and 12 years imprisonment.

*just totally overpowers your body - I can't describe it, it's just so terrible that you know it's going to happen."*

Jan Ruff-O'Herne wrote a book about her life, *50 Years of Silence*. She says much of the book is the original story she wrote for her daughters. Her daughter Carol Ruff, with Ned Landers and James Bradley, then made her story into a documentary. Also called *50 Years of Silence*, the documentary won Best Documentary, 1994 Australian Film Institute Awards and Most Outstanding Documentary, 1994 Australian LOGIES Awards.

*"There are no secrets now, I have told it all,"* Ruff-O'Herne says. *"I think once you tell, you've got to tell all, you don't keep any. If you keep a secret then you still have a burden that you keep for the rest of your life. Once you talk, once you tell, you have to tell all."*

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This paper is about exploring the process of journalism professional practice as a tool or methodology of recording a certain type of social history. Every piece of daily journalism records a moment and occurrence in a social political history of a nation, deemed 'newsworthy' by someone. It envisages journalists as pseudo-historians, albeit not academically rigid, historians nonetheless, as they retell people's stories. They are right in the middle of the retelling – the questions they ask and the questions they don't ask; the people they select to interview, and the ones who don't get to speak; the quotes they choose and the quotes left unwritten, although the words have been said out loud. Journalists are anything but objective. Merely being there - the relationship a journalist has with each and every subject is crucial to the final outcome of the story produced. Most journalists, to maintain their credibility, seek to be accurate and balanced and to adhere to a code of ethics. Janet Malcolm paints the darkest of pictures about this relationship but as Stimpson says 'some blood will fleck the keyboards of even the wisest' of writers. (Stimpson, 1990: 902)

Both Lyn Austin and Jan Ruff O'Herne entered into a relationship or contract with a writer or producer each time they recounted their ordeals. They both talk of relief and release at the telling of their untellable tales. And each of them makes a political statement both in maintaining their silence for years and then by breaking that silence. Ruth Wajnryb writes: '...the many faces and meanings of silence, the communicative power of silence as it fills the pauses and cracks and crannies of our discourse, of our relationships and of our lives...the pathology of silence. It rests on a pragmatist's approach to silence which obliges meaning to be drawn from context. Just as words do not carry their meanings around them but are

infused with context, so too the meaning of silence is infused by its context and draws its meaning from there.’ (Wajnryb, 2001: 25)

But the detailed questions put to these women, in both instances produced dramatic traumatic memory response. Lyn Austin’s face became haunted when relaying not just what she endured at the hands of her foster brother but at the memory of her sisters asking her to tell them what went on, and then having to relive it all again, as a prosecution witness, then under cross examination by her attacker’s defence. And at one point, Jan Ruff O’Herne closed her eyes and re-enacted her mother stroking her hair the night she was returned to her to the internment camp from the Japanese Virgin Brothel. She was clearly reliving that moment. These moments are reproduced in *Speaking Secrets* and there is no doubt they lead to a more evocative reading, in the best sense of literary journalism. But it must be asked: even though they agreed to be interviewed, is putting these women through further trauma worth it or justified? Many interviewees said that, in telling, they felt a sense of redressing history and that from their stories and suffering, society may learn and hopefully, what happened to them will never be perpetrated on others again.

It is in the recording of stories like Austin’s and Ruff O’Herne’s, and recording the silence that encompassed their stories for so long, that the relationship between author and subject - where the professional practice of journalists and journalism – perhaps begins to become more ‘morally defensible’ than Janet Malcolm could ever have imagined.

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