

# THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND: WRITING AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION CONFERENCE PAPER

## Making Elizabeth Jolley Complexly

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[Y]ou' and 'I' and 'she' pass and vanish; nothing stays;  
all changes; but not words, not paint.

—Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (267)

Biography is autobiography too, if only to the extent that a biographer chooses for some reason to write about Person X, or about X rather than Y. And all biographers reveal something about themselves, often a great deal, intentionally or not, by how they talk about their subjects. All biographers operate in the magnetic field of two opposed attractions, the public's right to know and the subject's right to privacy. The biographer's determination of what will and won't be investigated, what will and won't be told—and how it will be told—are all central to the project. My interest here is in the process of the revealing and concealing that is part of the biographer's task. In particular I will discuss how I worked within the twin limitations of what I knew and of what I chose to tell.

I might not be the best person to talk about autobiographical aspects of *Doing Life*, but I can say that what sustained me across a decade of research and writing was seeing an emerging pattern in Jolley's work that, for me, explained much about

her life and her fiction, especially the work she came to call 'fictional autobiography' (236). By that term she meant not so much that her novels document people and events from her life, although some do, but that they illustrate truths of her life that she progressively came to realise across decades of ruminating on the nature of the family: all of her books are about families or analogues of families, like schools, hospitals and nursing homes. Her many critics and general readers, especially her women readers, might have been personally invested in Jolley's analysing her own experience in order to understand her place and role in both her family of origin and her family of marriage.

In her essay "What Sins to Me Unknown Dipped Me in Ink", Jolley wrote of a pattern that started to form during her childhood near Birmingham: 'I became by nature and circumstance,' she said, 'a placator ... I am still a placator' (6). Her father Wilfrid Knight was her model, being a placator to her Austrian mother, Margarete Fehr Knight, who maintained a decades-long relationship with a twelve-year-older, wealthy bachelor-barrister who visited their home twice-weekly and sometimes took her on overnight trips to London and twice on six-week holidays to the continent, once with Jolley and once with Jolley's year-younger sister Madelaine. Wilfrid and Margarete in different but related ways enacted a profound sense of worthlessness: a self-effacing teacher, he was also a to-know-all-is-to-forgive-all Methodist lay preacher who on weekends engaged in dawn-to-dark literal and figurative ministering to men and women in nursing homes and hospitals; also a teacher, she was a domineering, attention-seeking individual who depended on the admiration of men rather than women, most conspicuously 'Mr B,' as Kenneth Clunes Berrington came to be known in the Knight family. The Knights needed others to validate their worth, but there were not enough grateful sick or dying people in Wolverhampton—in truth, not in all

the world—for him to believe he was worth anything, and not even Berrington's dying and leaving her today's equivalent of A\$1 000 000 could persuade her that she was. Their personal and marital unhappiness poisoned the atmosphere in their home, causing Jolley to deify her father for bearing his humiliation with dignity and to demonise her mother for making his life so miserable.

Jolley's parents' problems were rooted in their own families of origin, as Jolley's were in hers. Jolley attended to others all her life, even professionally, as a live-in domestic, house cleaner, door-to-door sales person, nurse, school matron, teacher and professor. Like her father, she married a narcissist, like her mother she entered a *ménage à trois* with ten-year-old Leonard Jolley and his eleven-year-old first wife—*ménage à trois* being a French term meaning 'a household of three' and implying some sexual activity among them. Leonard Jolley's form of narcissism manifested itself in his need for Elizabeth Jolley's constant attention and the admiration of everyone around him—she was his primary caretaker. Jolley's books are filled with caretaker-narcissist pairs, often two women, from *Weekly* and *Nastasya* in the *Newspaper of Claremont Street* onward, and her fiction frequently features sexual threesomes as well. The caretaker-narcissist dyad is a strong interest of mine that predates my work on Jolley, and thus my choice of her as a biographical subject was not an unmotivated one.

As for what to reveal, there were formal and informal constraints. I insisted that our twenty-year friendship must have priority over the biography, and Jolley agreed. So we had a lawyer draw up a document giving her the power to strike anything she wished or to require rewriting to her satisfaction and, in turn, she gave me letters of introduction in English and German for me to send to prospective interviewees and granted me unlimited access to her letters, diaries

and manuscripts. Although she did not require it, I gave my early chapters to her in instalments and read later ones to her when she was in hospital. She suggested corrections about facts but not about characterisations or interpretations, and she usually seemed pleased by what I had uncovered, some of it—especially about her parents and their families—previously unknown to her.

There were informal constraints too. Bob Sessions, her friend and head of Penguin, said family members never want biographies written of their parents or siblings. Certainly her sister Madelaine feared her peers would read of her own small, sad secrets, including her being sexually assaulted when she was twelve, marrying a man who left her to become a Roman Catholic priest, and her subsequently having an affair with a cross-dresser. ‘Why do you have to talk about me and our parents while writing about my sister?’ she asked. Why indeed!

Jolley was more sensitive to the possibility of her children being embarrassed by public ventilation of certain things that she, however, was not ashamed of. They centred on her parents’ unusual marriage, her unusual relationship with Leonard Jolley and Joyce Hancock, and the illegitimacy of her first child, although as she became more successful she spoke and wrote of such topics. What was possibly of more concern to her was how critics might speculate on her sexuality. Prompted by the same-sex female relationships in more than half of her novels, many readers assumed that, if a sympathetic protagonist thinks or does Z, then the author does too. Jolley always sidestepped questions about her sexuality, once telling an impertinent interviewer who asked if she were a lesbian, ‘No, dear, I’m a grandmother.’

Her deflecting questions about sexuality was more pointed in her 1999 Radio National interview on 'Australia Talks Books.' When Ramona Koval described Dalton Foster, the protagonist of Jolley's new book *Lovesong*, as a paedophile, Jolley immediately responded, 'I don't say he is a paedophile at all in the book' (245). Koval had read what Jolley had not written. Jolley's response about Dalton, like that about herself, points to the fact that, for her, the prior question must always be about love. That was a truth she began to understand as a teenager in the 1930s when she came to the remarkable linked realisations that 'all war is wrong and that both my father and Mr Berrington loved my mother very much' ('Of Butchers and Bilberry Basket' 45).

Since Jolley's concerns related to what her children might think of her parents' marriage and of her relationships with Leonard Jolley, on the one hand, and what people might think about the extravagant sexuality in her fiction and its implications about her own life, on the other. Her concerns constituted the weight of responsibility that pressed most heavily on me. There were four main techniques I used to deal with them.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the first technique was to highlight sexuality. Examples in the book include homosexual practices among the boys at Jolley's Quaker school in the 1930s, her own same-sex sexual experimentation at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in the early 1940s<sup>1</sup>, advances made to her by an elderly honorary 'uncle' who was a avid nudist and by a suitor her own age when she

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding what I call Jolley's 'infatuation' with Mary Doyle (84), Elizabeth Webby says, 'Jolley was a little more forthcoming when I dared to raise this matter with her in the early 1980s, referring to such relationships as a prelude to heterosexual ones' (Webby, 'A Jolley Difficult Life Until the Final Chapter: Her Fiction Explores Problems of Family, Love and Desire,' *Sydney Morning Herald 'Spectrum—Books*, 27-28 September 2008, p. 36).

was a live-in domestic in the late 1940s. Still others involved the various gropings and groupings among her live-in colleagues when she was Matron of Pinewood school in 1950 where a bohemian man also made inept advances to her and, in 1955, inappropriate suggestions made by her kilt-wearing dentist in Edinburgh. As well, there was a third *ménage à trois*, one the Canadian novelist Elizabeth Smart (who boarded her children at Pinewood) had with the English poet George Barker and his novelist-wife Elspeth Barker. If I ignored sexuality altogether, like an unacknowledged elephant in the corner of the room, it would have become a more ominous presence.

The second technique was to name the people who inspired many of her characters, like Susanne Paterson, her Edinburgh obstetrician/gynaecologist on whom Laura Ward in *Palomino* is based—Laura is a gynaecologist who has an affair with Eva Jackson and later with Eva's daughter Andrea. Jolley's prototypes include a handful of men and a score of women, one or more of them appearing in virtually all of her novels and some of her short stories.<sup>2</sup> This cataloguing technique is meant to suggest how it was mainly by focusing on the women in her life that Jolley came to her various realisations about how she and other women could function and flourish in a patriarchal world.

My third technique was to elaborate on Aristophanes' myth in Plato's *Symposium*, one that Jolley has the character Laura refer to in *Palomino* (193-194) when she says:

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<sup>2</sup> The women included Nora Bland, Ludmila Blotnicki, Joyce Broom, Gertrude Carter, Mary Doyle, Eleanor Ellwood, Peggy Frazer, Joyce Hancock, Marie Kemmeter, Edna Kenyatta, Madelaine Knight, Margarete Fehr Knight, Hannah Levey, Alix Macswiney, Elsa Marsh, Susanne Paterson, Irma Roitman, Elizabeth Strachan, Hilde Vorwinkl, and Gertrude Whele. The men were Kenneth Berrington, Wladyslav 'Steve' Blotnicki, John Broom, Andrew Dungey, Douglass Marsh, Wilfrid Knight, and Leonard Jolley.

You seem horribly concerned with right and wrong. To me it's not so easily divided, one from the other. I don't see that right and wrong come into it. It is more as if two halves of a whole have come together. And when two people love as we do it seems to be the two halves recognizing each other and becoming one. It was the neo-Platonists in the Renaissance who held those views

Aristophanes posits that in the beginning we were all spherical Janus-faced, four-armed and -legged people of three genders, one group as if two women joined back to back, another as two men back to back, and a third as a man and a woman comparably paired: like Adam and Eve's 'Fall' in the Garden of Eden, some transgression of theirs caused the gods to slice them vertically in two—and now each of us seeks her or his other half. The myth is a metaphor about love, about people sensing a need to be 'wholly one,' in Aristophanes' words; he says that, if offered the chance, no one 'would deny or would not acknowledge that this meeting and melting into one another, this becoming one instead of two, was the very expression of [our] ancient need' (187 in Jolley, 192d in Plato). I introduced Aristophanes' myth not to define Jolley's personal predilections but to explain two things: her belief in our primal need for love, that need motivating the characters in her fiction who display such a range of sexualities; and her belief that it is more important to seek to understand love's motivations and expressions than to judge them.

The fourth technique was to render some scenes polyvalent or ambiguous upon reflection. An example involved John Broom, a librarian, minister and arts enthusiast a year younger than she, whom the Jolleys met in Scotland in the 1950s. In 1956, he flirts with her, and she does not rebuff him. In early 1958, the Jolleys discuss sexual love outside of marriage, Leonard opposing the idea because of the

deception it inevitably would entail. A week later, Broom having cancelled a scheduled visit, Leonard is in a fury, perhaps because he is deprived of Broom's company, or perhaps because Elizabeth has gone sledging with one of their student boarders—he says it is adultery for a woman to go sledging with another man. Does he suspect that she is having an affair? If so, with *whom*? And *is she*? Is *he*?

In mid March the Jolleys socialise separately, Elizabeth going to the movies with international students (ironically, to see a film called *Freedom*), Leonard attending the ballet with a pretty young nurse who looked after Elizabeth when she was hospitalised the year before. In April, Jolley secretly gives Broom four chapters from a draft novel to read, not trusting Leonard to do so because earlier, construing the book to be autobiographical, he had disliked what he found in it. And in May 1958 she tells Broom that, although she has not made love with him, she trusts his judgement as a reader... Thus 'sex raises its ugly head,' as Jolley's Headmaster at school said on catching sight of what he called 'that vulgar expanse of flesh between the knee and the thigh'<sup>3</sup>: I raise a question about Jolley's sexuality that I do not conclusively answer.

To summarise, I attempted to balance the public's right to know by talking of sexuality—others' and Jolley's—and by identifying the real-life people on whom characters in her fictional autobiographies are based, most of them women. At the same time, I tried to contextualise Jolley's sensitivities by documenting her twin beliefs about the nature of love and the need not to be judgemental of the conventional, unconventional and even taboo ways that, in an attempt to become whole, people continue to lick their hidden wound—in Helen Daniel's words—so

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<sup>3</sup> An anecdote Jolley told to Dibble.

as to heal it.<sup>4</sup> And, finally, by rendering some key scenes through images whose potential meanings alter depending on what they are juxtaposed to, I worked to provide readers with data relevant for constructing their own versions of Elizabeth Jolley.

She was not simple but complex, capable of imagining and writing with great empathy about the loveless and the lovelorn. They largely live in the margins of society and include con artists who practice victimless scams and ordinary people of basic good will who engage in an astonishing variety of sexual practices, primarily celibacy. Throughout, Elizabeth Jolley remained non-judgemental of her characters, even the most unlovable of them. Likewise, I wanted to present her life-story non-judgementally in order to encourage and facilitate its being complexly remembered.

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*You can hear the full text of this paper at  
<http://www.nla.gov.au/podcasts/talks.html>*

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<sup>4</sup> 'Plotting: A Quarterly Account of Recent Fiction,' *Overland*, vol. 115, 1989, p. 33.