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What is close: objects as creation of adoption belongings

Christine Rogers and Laura Fulton

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RMIT University

Christine Rogers and Laura Fulton

What is close: objects as creation of adoption belongings

Abstract

Adoptees can experience pervasive feelings of not-belonging, absence, and loss (Verrier, 1993); however, precious objects can help alleviate these feelings. Russell Belk (1998) argues that some objects come to be seen as part of the self. For writers Christine Rogers and Laura Fulton, a handkerchief taken from a birthfather, and a teddy bear gifted by a special uncle, helped create belonging and connection. In this article, Rogers and Fulton introduce their cherished objects and explore the complex layers of attachment that their items generate and express. Rogers and Fulton argue that these things are haunted (Brown, Reavey & Brookfield, 2014), invested with power and rich with meaning. For Rogers, the stolen handkerchief expresses her fear that the attachment to her birthfather was not stable or permanent, and embroidering the handkerchief acknowledged and helped transform this adoption fear. For Fulton, a teddy bear was the conduit for her complex thoughts and feelings when she was brought into a new family as a toddler. It was the bear who helped her storytelling practices, which were a way of addressing and understanding the silence and loss of her adoption.

Biographical Note

Christine Rogers is a writer, filmmaker, and textile artist. She has multiple credits in drama and education, and digital stories that have screened at several festivals. Her writing has been published in anthologies, journals, books, newspapers, and blogs, and her embroidery, 'Elizabeth and Christine Sampler', was nominated for a bi-annual Victoria Craft Award. She recently completed a creative practice PhD at RMIT where she was the recipient of a Vice Chancellor's Scholarship.

Laura Fulton is a writer, teacher, and researcher based in Melbourne. Born in the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas, Laura recently completed a PhD that explores how the adopted person may address issues of identity, origin, and belonging through creative writing experimentation. Laura's creative and critical work has appeared in *Swamp*, *TEXT*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and *Pendulum Papers*. Her current novel in progress addresses themes of disruption, longing, and loss through adoption.

Keywords

Adoption – creative practice research – postmemory – objects – childhood resilience

Introduction

We all have attachments to objects that are mundane to others, some from our childhoods, others that we have been given or bought ourselves – objects that speak to our identities and how we see ourselves and show ourselves to the world (Ahuvia, 2005). For adoptees, removed from our birth families, our blood kin, objects associated with that adoption can have power and agency, and play an important part in the ongoing never-ending story of repairing the adoption wound (Verrier, 1993). Elspeth Probyn argues that she writes in order ‘to bring what seems to be far away up close’ (1996, p. 13) and this is the intention of this article – to bring *up close* our relationships with two objects from our adoptions, and to explore how these objects speak to us, and for us, and help alleviate adoption loss and silence. For Laura Fulton, this is a teddy bear with which she developed a close, personal bond, a relationship that buoyed her through the early days of her adoption. For Christine Rogers this is a handkerchief she stole from her birthfather Brian when she was staying with him, which she then incorporated into her creative practice by embroidering.

Laura and Christine met while undertaking creative practice research at RMIT University, Melbourne. We are both adopted and are using creative practice in order to research entangled belongings and complex and contested identities. In this article we use a collaborative narrative approach to explore our relationships with our precious objects, and their relationships with us. We follow the example of Anne Harris and Enza Gandolfo (2014) and weave our separate stories together, alongside theory, to throw light on what these objects mean to us, to extrapolate what objects may mean to adoptees, and how these objects might help in the ongoing work of belonging. We are both based in, and write into, the field of adoption scholarship, but each of us work with different but related methodologies.

Adoption is a story from the margins, and the ongoing wound of adoption a difficult story to tell, and to hear. However, we argue that in telling this story we remind others of the contested and uncertain nature of all belongings (Yngvesson, 2003), and the possibilities that ordinary objects offer all of us for comfort and healing.

Methodologies

Christine works with autoethnography, where story and theory work hand-in-hand to tell evocative, emotional stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). The autoethnographer tells stories from the inside of culture (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), putting herself at the centre of the work and disrupting normative stories (Fitzpatrick, 2016). This methodology encourages us to tell personal stories as a revolt against dry and impersonal writing (Holman Jones et al., 2013) and to reveal our vulnerabilities to unsettle the reader and help instigate change (Holman Jones, 2008). Autoethnography encourages a questioning of the relentless academic focus on the intellectual (Toyosaki, 2018), supporting a turn to privileging other kinds of sensory and intuitive knowledges. This focus fits with the embodied experience of the adoptee who feels abandonment in her bones and describes our embodied experience of the adoption objects we speak of. A soft bear held in small hands, pressed to a tearful face. A worn handkerchief used

to wipe a brow, stuffed in a jacket pocket and touched as comfort as the owner moves through an airport, leaving again.

Leon Anderson and Bonnie Glass-Coffin (2013) define the five key features of autoethnographic practice as visibility of self, strong reflexivity, engagement, vulnerability, and rejection of closure and finality. Christine follows these as a methodology but also as a making method in her adoption explorations. As a practitioner, she was central and visible in her creative practice of writing, filmmaking, and embroidery, revealing the private and allowing herself to be vulnerable (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). This self-reflexivity was assisted by creative writing, which helped her to think productively and with candour, allowing her to find her story in order to tell it. Much of her creative practice in film and embroidery was experimental and open-ended; 'emergent, generative, and responsive' (Bartleet, 2013, p. 450). Scholars who use autoethnography in their creative practice explorations include Eleanor Kim through video (2000), Jean Smith through dance (2016), and Esther Fitzpatrick with stitching (2016).

Laura's methodology involves revisiting and reimagining the past through creative writing practice (Probyn, 1996). Her research considers how the drawing of imaginary portraits (Saunders, 2010), the use of the epistolary form, the writing of memoir, and the (re)visiting of place through literal and metaphorical means, may allow the adopted person to make connections to the past and recover some sense of what was lost. Using these creative means, she can then develop a more complete understanding of her fractured identity and a greater sense of belonging. This project is also informed by Anne Marie Fortier's notion that we may consider home as a destination rather than a place (2001) and Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory (2012). Postmemory was initially used as a way to describe how the children of Holocaust survivors were haunted by a past they had physically missed but which exerted a powerful, psychical pull on them. Hirsch argues that people haunted by postmemory may use photographs or may travel to places featured in their parents' stories to seek catharsis for their strange absences and yearnings. Adoptees can experience similar hauntings and may be drawn powerfully to photographs and places as they seek what is missing. Objects can also stand in for these absences and show our attempts to mitigate loss (Ormond, 2018).

Laura's methodology also draws on aspects of autoethnography, arguing that the hearing of the fractured narrative is just as important as the telling. Her research sees storytelling used as a method of building a relationship between storyteller and reader for the purpose of communicating the ways in which we have reinvented and taken agency over both our identity and our lived experiences. This storytelling allows the adopted person to connect with those moments of difficulty she has encountered throughout her life, the ways in which she has known stigma and marginalisation, giving voice to her disruption in a meaningful way. As with practices of autoethnography, she needs a listening ear who will interact with the story, one who will live its reality, even if just for a moment, and find a way to connect with her through that narrative (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017, p. vii). During the course of her research, Laura has found an understanding ear in the form of friends and colleagues (like

Christine), and through publications. As a child, however, her most reliable – and often her only – understanding ear was her teddy bear.

Stranger adoptions

Although both of us are adopted, our experiences are quite different. Christine was adopted in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, in 1965 in a *closed-stranger* adoption. This means that the names of her birthparents were removed from her birth certificate and replaced with the names of her adopted parents (Nation, 2001). The identity of her birth family was a secret until the New Zealand government opened its files in 1985 (Else, 2018). Christine found her birthfather when she was 30 years old and formed a close and loving relationship with him until his death in 2019. In contrast, the relationship with her birthmother lasted only a few years and was fraught with unfulfilled longings.

Janet Carsten suggests that birthmother relationships are often doomed; ‘doubly foreclosed, as it were, by death, by particular histories, by the nature of the personalities involved, by the excessive demands on one side or on both’ (2000, p. 691). With Christine’s birthfather Brian, these demands were muted, and she enjoyed a relationship that argues against the primacy often given to birthmothers in adoption reunion narratives that promise elusive healing and wholeness (Hughes, 2015). However, despite much evidence of her belonging, the deep precarity of her relationship with Brian can be glimpsed in her stealing of his handkerchief.

Unlike Christine, who was surrendered at birth, Laura was three years old when she was taken from her birthplace in southern Arkansas and adopted by strangers in 1973. Her birth certificate was also recreated to read as though her adoptive parents were the only parents she’d ever had. All other identifying information about her previous life was altered, with the exception of her middle name – the one by which she had always been called. Laura learned the identity of her birthmother in 1999; however, she did not find or reconnect with her until 2012. Laura’s relationship with her biological father, whose identity remains uncertain, continues to exist only through writing and other forms of imaginative creation. She was able to make sense of the loss of her original home and family by reinventing her narrative identity through stories she told to her teddy bear, a gift given to her shortly after her adoption by a charismatic, compassionate uncle who somehow imbued the bear with his own personality, allowing Laura to develop resilience during a time of difficult transition.

The things we own that own us

Russell Belk argues that our possessions can be seen as core to our self-identity, because when objects are lost, damaged or taken, we can experience grief and a diminution of self. Belk writes that some objects fall into a ‘special category’ in that they are typically seen as ‘part of the extended self’ (1998, p. 140) and treated differently because of this. For Belk, this category contains collections, pets, and money. We argue that in this category are objects associated with adoption.

Steven Brown, Paula Reavey, and Helen Brookfield assert that objects that come with a child from their birth family into the new adopted home are ‘spectral objects’ (2014, p. 176). These objects resonate with ‘trouble’. They bring the biological family physically into the home, speaking of what-might-have-been, and what-could-still-be, undermining precarious new beginnings and new belongings. We argue that our adoption objects are also ‘spectral’ in that they connect us powerfully to alternative lives and ‘vibrate’ with complex feelings of abandonment and loss.

Neither Christine nor Laura were given any objects from their birth families as babies. Adopted as a baby after ten days with her birthmother in a Salvation Army home for unwed mothers, Christine was considered to be ‘tabula rasa’ – a blank slate – in the common adoption practice of the time. Adoption was considered a new beginning, a chance to rid one’s self of the ‘stain’ of illegitimacy (Else, 1991), and Christine came to her new family with no connection to her birth kin, not even a name (Haenga-Collins, 2017). The time frame of ten days was designed to model ‘normal’ families, where mums and babies came home from hospital after ten days.

Adoption was meant to be invisible, but it never felt that way. This split from our genetic families often caused a split within ourselves – something that became apparent when we discovered, as adult adoptees, that our disorientating experience of the world was not specific to us but rather experienced by most adoptees. Betty Jean Lifton argues that adopted people feel ‘unborn’ (1994, p. 7), unreal to themselves and to others, because of the trauma of separation. This is the engine that drives many adoptees on roots journeys, as we seek to settle ghosts, to feel ‘real’ to ourselves, to find a place to call home. But this is always an impossible journey. What we are more likely to find is painful reminders of what will always be missing and what can never be replaced (Carsten, 2000).

Material objects can be witnesses to a belonging and remind us that home can be a place we carry with us. In Christine’s case, the handkerchief is a symbol of how she was not able to trust the relationship with her birthfather and needed something of his to take home and keep. She needed a material reminder of a connection that would always feel precarious, although it was full of love.

For Laura, adopted at the age of three, old enough to remember her biological mother and the large extended family with which she had lived shortly before her re-homing, a certain bear would help her find a place in her new house. Also designed to be an invisible adoption, Laura was matched with her new family based on her appearance. With her father’s blue eyes and her mother’s dark hair, no one could tell she was not biologically related to them the way her two sisters were. What was harder was explaining to a toddler why everyone was calling her by a different name, where all of her brothers and sisters and cousins had gone, how to adjust in this strange and quiet place with so many rules. While Laura’s new family loved her, they had very little information to give her and few ways to ease her transition. It was assumed by all that she would not be able to remember much of the life she’d had before, and the sooner she adjusted to her new life, the better. At the time, the stigma surrounding illegitimate children, as well as women and parents (especially mothers) who surrendered their children for adoption, meant that every member of the adoption triad was encouraged to complete the adoption

transaction and never speak of the matter again. For this reason, Laura had few tools to process the experience of changing homes, changing names, and changing families. 'Bear', as he became known, would be the answer – the listening participant that helped her find her way through the maze of her new life.

In the following section, we will tell the stories of our objects – how we came to have them, how they have travelled with us, how they speak to us and us to them, and how they play a part in our new stories.

A handkerchief embroidered with a B

When I was a young one of my chores was to do the ironing on a Sunday afternoon, and in the laundry would be my adoptive father's handkerchiefs. They were large and soft, and the cotton smelt delicious under the heat of the iron as I ironed them into a neat square, finishing up by folding them with the embroidered P in the corner, sitting on top. In the action of ironing, taking care of his things, I connected with my father, taking care of him and expressing love in a way that was acceptable in our emotionally restrained family. When, years later, I saw my birthfather's handkerchief drying in the hot water cupboard, embroidered with a B, I could not resist.

When I met my birthfather Brian, he was immediately welcoming of me, and it was not long before I was staying at his and his partner Carolyn's house in Auckland. Auckland is tropical with a high rainfall, and Carolyn would place damp washing in the hot water cupboard to dry. It was when I was putting in some clothes of my own that I saw Brian's handkerchief. What an intimate object a handkerchief is. As intimate as underwear but without the suggestion of sex or other adult concerns. This handkerchief was clearly Brian's, but it also bridged the divide between my birthfather and my adoptive father.

From there it was an easy step to put it in my suitcase to take back to Australia, not saying a word to Brian or Carolyn. Why did I not ask if I could have it? There was something childlike in my sudden attachment to the handkerchief and my desire to take it. How to speak of the shame and longing that lurks in the heart of adoptees, feelings that link us to childhood and speak of the abandonment that always lives in our hearts (Verrier, 1993)? Seeking to repair, we secretly hope to return to childhood to be nurtured again, but this is impossible. Lifton argues that in the reunion process, the adoptee 'must accept that they cannot be fully the birth parents' child any more than they could be fully the adoptive parents' child. They must claim their own child, become their own person, and belong to themselves' (1994, p. 259). Time cannot be turned back. Our birth kin are adults as we are, and the relationship must be an adult one. But our childish self waits just under the surface. Stealing this handkerchief tapped into the silencing of adoption, turning me into a thief. Ann Nation notes that reunions are challenging for adoptees and that 'many have major fears about being abandoned and/or rejected again' (2001, p. 110). Perhaps this was my answer to my ongoing subterranean fear that my relationship with Brian would end. Certainly in that moment I expressed the agency that had been denied me as a child when my future had been decided by others.

For many years the handkerchief sat in my drawer. For some time I had used it myself, casually tucked into the back pocket of my jeans, and in that intimate action I enacted a bodily belonging to Brian that was denied to me as a child. This handkerchief, aged and stained, holds for me what Tim Cresswell calls the ‘enchantment of objects’ (2012, p. 168), its value entirely bound up with the fact that it was Brian’s handkerchief. It had travelled in his pockets, been held by him, brought him relief and comfort. It was a ‘silent witness to a ... personal history’ (Barrett, 2008). Recently, when I found it again in the bottom of my linen draw, I decided to embroider it with the story of how it came into my possession as part of my creative research exploring my birth kin.

Let me describe it. It is not a prepossessing handkerchief. It is pale fawn with a hard dark line just inside the stitched edge. Five centimetres from the edge is a band of ten white-stitched lines very close to each other, contained within fine dark brown-stitched borders. There is an attractive capital B embroidered in one corner in what seems like a 1930s sort of font, facing the corner, with three dark brown dots above and below it. It is stained with regular use, one pink smear probably my lipstick.

I washed the handkerchief, but it remained stained, marked by life. I then hand-wrote and embroidered the words, ‘*When I first stayed with my birthfather I stole this handkerchief*’, along one edge. I cannot actually remember when I did steal it, but I took liberty in making this statement of origin, speaking the dissonant idea that you can *first stay* with your father, when you’re meant to be with your father from when you’re a baby.

As recently as the 20th Century, women would embroider traditional designs to showcase their skills, following century-old traditions (Parker, 2010). However, I join modern embroiders who are reinterpreting and reenergising this vernacular (Kettle & McKeating, 2012). In telling the story of this theft I undercut the conservatism of traditional embroidery. Once sewing machines had taken the work of sewing clothing from the mid-19th Century onwards, middle class girls learnt to embroider in order to mark linens with initials (Parker, 2010) so that when they were taken away to be washed, they could be returned to the right household. Household linens were expensive and needed to be taken good care of. This is where the tradition of the letter on the handkerchief comes from.

In adding my mark to it, a fragment of my adoption story, I speak of my existence, stitching into and against the absence that always threatens me as an adoptee. This same impulse can be seen in the way that early 20th Century suffragettes in Holloway Prison smuggled out handkerchiefs with their embroidered signatures ‘to name themselves, over and over, as survivors, as individuals in a system where they were reduced to a mere number’ (Hunter, 2019, p. 281). The hand-made quality of the stitched sentence stands in sharp contrast to the neat machine-embroidered B. In other words, I have stitched myself onto the handkerchief, leaving my physical traces (Millar qtd. in Kettle & McKeating, 2012) and making it part of myself (Belk, 1998).

My beloved birthfather died in early 2019 and I returned to Auckland for his funeral. Sometime after the wake I told Carolyn, his partner, about the handkerchief and she laughed. It has not been Brian’s after all: the B was for Bernie, his father, a man I never met. Brian had wondered

where his handkerchief had gone! Brian had had a difficult relationship with his father, and this was one of the reasons I had not made the effort to go and meet my grandfather when I had the chance, something I now regret. I loved the resonances of this story, and that now I have a piece of fabric that links me beyond Brian to his father Bernie. It has become a strange heirloom. Belk notes that heirlooms allow family members to feel ‘permanence and place in the world that extends beyond their own lives’ (1988, p. 159). This handkerchief helps mark my place in the world.

Red shoes and a bear

The first gift I received from my new parents on the day they came to collect me was a pair of red shoes, shiny and pretty, appropriate for wearing to church. Not a doll or a blanket I could cuddle. Shoes. On the way to my new home, we stopped for lunch. My parents later told me I ate spaghetti with my hands, as if I’d never seen cutlery before.

That evening, we arrived at my parents’ modest house in the Ozarks. I’m sure they made an innocent comment: ‘We’re home’, or something similar, but I didn’t know how to react to being so far away from the muggy Mississippi Delta region. I’d no sooner walked through the front door when I began acting out. After upending my older sister’s bead box (tiny craft beads carefully separated by colour), I threw a proper tantrum, running around the house, screaming. In response, my father gave me a spanking (the first of many), then hugged me tight – I was loved, he wanted me to know, but there were boundaries. That night, feeling scared and alone, I wet the bed (I would do so for years). My behaviour was no surprise. I don’t know much about what my life had been prior to my adoption, but I know enough to know that I’d been so neglected that, at three years old, I had mastered neither a fork or the toilet.

Even if I had come from the best of circumstances, my anxiety and discontent should have been expected. How else should a child react to the sudden disappearance of her mother, her family, every toy and room and person, all the habits and routines that she had always known? A person of any age would likely struggle to adjust to finding himself or herself suddenly immersed in a completely different world, being called by a different name, being told that every relationship had been erased and reconstructed for no reason that made any sense (if any reason were given at all). Little wonder then that, despite my parents’ best efforts, this abrupt change in circumstance came as a shock to me, as I struggled to remember where I had come from, who I was supposed to be.

In recent decades, adoptive parents have been encouraged to assist their adopted children with re-building their deconstructed pasts by creating life story books using a combination of memories, objects and stories. These personal story books may include narrative elements, photographs, and other items designed to fill the gaps in the child’s incomplete origin story, with the intention of allowing the child to construct her own identity (Watson et al., 2015, p. 4). The hope is that she will have fewer gaps to fill as an adult, and as a result, less need to return to childhood and re-examine her adoptive identity later in life.

But this attention to bridging the gaps in the adopted child's origin story is a relatively recent development. The use of life story books only began in the 1970s when reforms in social work saw new attention given to providing children with continuity and a sense of identity (Rees, 2017, p. 9). For adopted children of my generation, there was little guidance. The stigma surrounding adoption at the time meant that I was discouraged from asking questions; I felt guilty for even wondering about my previous family. I would have to find some way to navigate this new life. The answer would be a teddy bear.

I'd been in my new home for just a few weeks when my uncle came from Texas to Arkansas to visit his nieces. He found me a scared, quiet little girl, trying to be good, often failing. One afternoon during that visit, he disappeared to the shops for a while and returned with a gift for me: a fluffy blue teddy bear with a wind-up music box. Somehow, my sweet and funny uncle infused that simple toy with compassion and kindness, and I believed, from the moment he was mine, that Bear could hear me and understand me and that he loved me. I became attached to my bear almost immediately, talking to him for endless hours, taking him with me everywhere, sleeping with him at night. To me, he was real, alive, fully cognisant. He could hear me and understand me, laugh at my jokes, comfort me, soothe me, sing to me – I heard his voice inside my head. There was nothing imaginary about him, and because I knew he was listening, I could talk to him, and I knew he would relate to every word I said.

Like so many other adopted children, I was what Harris calls a 'narrative whore', someone for whom 'any story will do' (Harris & Gandolfo, 2014, p. 573), these fictions essentially all I had to call my own (Homans, 2007, p. 77). I knew my real origin story was full of gaps, holes, omissions, but that part of my narrative was something my parents and I rarely discussed. For years, I had the same recurring dream about playing in the dirt, under the trees outside a falling-down house, a mob of other children nearby, and then driving away from that place with a beautiful dark-haired woman. I never knew if the dream was a memory or another story concocted by my mind of a place I used to live, people I used to know.

Bear helped me find a way to bridge the gaps between what little I knew and everything I didn't. My faithful companion and witness, he listened carefully when I cried, validating those words I could whisper to no one else. As I played out what Margaret Homans calls the 'powerful and constructive fictiveness of origins' (2007, p. 76), I spent many nights lying in my childhood bed, dreaming of my birthparents, especially my birthmother, who looked very like Cinderella in the ballgown scenes of the 1950 animated Disney film – the blonde up-do, the elegant dress. She was beautiful and blameless, spent most of her days singing and was – like me – royalty, I was certain. Harris was no less delusional; she thought her mother was 'probably a movie star ... Bette Midler' (Harris & Gandolfo, 2014, p. 573). In the absence of reliable information, these fantasies were all I had.

The key to my story was my separation from my birthmother, how that crucial moment happened. As my heroic, one-dimensional protagonist, my birthmother had no room for improvement, so my imaginary villain was The Evil Queen, presumably my biological grandmother but never a blood relative (my birthmother's stepmother perhaps). This woman was cold, severe, and very like The Evil Queen from Disney's 1937 film *Snow White* – you

should know that *The Wonderful World of Disney* aired on TV every Sunday night when I was little; my sisters and I never missed an episode. My birthmother, always the innocent victim (I assumed), was unfairly torn from the arms of the hardworking peasant (or sometimes prince) that she'd married, a devastatingly handsome man with whom she shared an eternal love. I was, of course, taken without her knowledge or consent.

No matter how fantastical my backstory became, no matter how much it changed or how little sense it made, Bear always agreed with me, supported me, championed me. With the help of his understanding ear, little by little, I found my way. My supportive internal monologue was the antidote to a separation trauma that I had few other means to manage. In my effort to narrate myself and see who I was (Harris & Gandolfo, 2014), I found my first sense of identity.

Research from the 1990s and 2000s suggests that many children who were adopted around the same time as me were doomed to grow up poorly adjusted, often destined for institutional care of one kind or another (Bakersmans-Kranenburg et al, 2008; Dorais, 2012; Kriebel & Wentzel, 2011; McWhinnie, 1998; Smith, 2001— this list represents only a small sample). There is also evidence, however, that adopted children may be better placed to develop creativity (Drake & Winner, 2018; Eysenck, 2010; Homans, 2013; Shuttleworth, 2013), resilience (DuMont et al, 2007; Garmezy, 1991; Masten et al, 2002; Masten et al, 1990; Masten, 2013; McGloin & Widom, 2001; Rutter, 2006; Ungar, 2011), and their own sense of identity (Compton, 2016; Howe et al, 2008; Rosenthal, 1993).

In some cases, the experience of being separated from one's biological parents and re-homed elsewhere may allow certain children to develop coping mechanisms that serve them for life. For me, Bear played a key role in helping me redefine who I understood myself to be and gave me a way to manage the stress of my sudden and traumatic separation from everyone and everything I had ever known, a separation that would have made little sense to a three-year-old, regardless of how anyone might have tried to explain it to me.

Michael Rutter defines resilience as 'the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences' (2006, p. 2). Research around child development and coping ability in the face of difficult or extreme situations reveals that, in many cases, children are able to demonstrate what Ann Masten calls the 'ordinary magic' (qtd. in Ungar, 2011, p. 1) of developing successfully in spite of adversity. While the ways in which people respond to environmental hazards varies considerably from person to person, Rutter points to evidence suggesting that experiencing stress or adversity, in certain circumstances, 'sometimes *strengthens* resistance to later stress – a so-called "steeling" effect' (Rutter, 2006, p.2, emphasis in the original). My stress manifested itself in my bed wetting, my misbehaviour, and my withdrawn personality – an observation my uncle made, a trait that seemed out of the ordinary compared not only to other children he knew at the time but also to the person I later became.

While most research on childhood resilience has dealt specifically with children exposed to major natural disasters, war, abuse, and sex trafficking, the argument could be made that adopted children may also develop the same sort of resilience. Michael Ungar cites nearly a dozen sources that suggest that being exposed to war is 'less traumatic and debilitating for

children than the separation they experience when sent away from their caregivers' (2011, p. 3). In other words, being removed from one's parents was found to be even more difficult for children than living through the London Blitz, or serving as child soldiers, or surviving war situations in the Balkans and Israel. Rutter argues that resilience may derive from controlling the exposure the child receives to the risk (2006, p. 11) – in other words, receiving small, controlled doses of stress within the context of an otherwise positive environment may increase the ability to resist stress later in life (2006, p. 2), allowing the child to learn how to overcome adversity in the same way a vaccine allows the body to 'learn' how to overcome certain infections. Rutter posits that 'successful coping' is most likely the key feature of the ability to develop resilience, something most likely involving adapting the body, developing positive psychological habits and feelings of worth, and acquiring effective strategies for coping or redefining the experience (2006, p. 2).

My coping strategy was story. As a child, I whispered fantastical daydreams to my little blue bear. While that sort of storytelling did not fully allow me to untangle the experience of having been removed, rehomed, and renamed, in a sense, it saved my life. My imagination allowed me to create a world in which my birthmother was simply in a castle somewhere else. I had not been abandoned, rejected or even surrendered – the Evil Queen was responsible for our separation. I was not the awkward outsider, always slightly different to my family and everyone else around me, always proving myself against some ubiquitous stigma I wore but could not name. I was of royal blood and someday they would all know the truth when a huge white carriage pulled by eight white horses came to collect me. Wouldn't they all be sorry when I gave them each a million dollars and I went to live in a castle of my own? I avoided a raft of negative emotions (and the negative outcomes so many adopted children often suffer, I believe) because I knew Bear understood me. He understood all of it.

Since that day in 1973, when my uncle came back from the shops with a special toy just for me, I've always had Bear. Every time I've moved house, across town or across the world, I've brought Bear with me, always in an open bag (he needs to breathe). Once when I was moving and I left him in my mother's care, I asked her to make sure he was not put inside a box. I was 32 years old, but my mother understood – throughout my childhood, she washed and repaired and restuffed Bear over and over. She knew what he means to me. Bear now lives on my lounge room shelf, in between two stuffed friends. His music box has long since broken, and he can't sit upright anymore, but I know he's there, listening, loving me.

Conclusion

The handkerchief, perhaps borrowed by Brian from his father, used by him, and then stolen by me, and now made part of my creative practice, has had many lives and many meanings, none foreclosing the last. Keith Jacobs and Jeff Malpas contend that objects are '*polysemic...* generating a multiplicity of meanings and effects' (Jacobs & Malpas, 2013, p. 286). But it was through writing, through paying careful attention, and turning the incoherent into words, that I came to understand what had seemed a strange and unsettling theft. Writing was the archaeological tool that I used to gently scrape away the layers to reveal the embodied effects

of adoption that remain in me. The handkerchief now binds me and my story powerfully to Brian and his story. It is a material reminder that I belong. Brown et al remind us that objects have the power to link the past and the present, and this comes from ‘the contingent and situated manner in which they are encountered in acts of remembering’ (2014, p. 181). With the handkerchief, I remember Brian, and I remember the love in our house in Auckland, how welcome I was. I remember too that all love is precarious, and because of that, precious.

I’ve never stopped telling myself stories, never stopped finding a way to save myself, never stopped reviewing and revising that ongoing process of defining my identity. But a story of trauma is one that needs not just to be told, but to be heard. I now use creative writing to engage with an audience beyond my own loyal teddy bear. This readership may engage with what Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner call my ‘struggles with adversity’ and ‘empathize with ... [my] stigma and marginalization’, understanding the trouble I’ve had ‘in finding words to express [my] pain and disruption meaningfully’ (qtd. in Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017, p. vii). However, when I was three years old, Bear was all I needed. That simple object – audience, confidante, friend – helped me to rescue myself.

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