

Central Queensland University

Donna Lee Brien

The anniversary: a screenplay based on an historical crime

Abstract:

This screenplay is a fictionalised version of the events in Sydney, Australia, in 1894, that led to the criminal sensation that was known as ‘The Dean Case’. When, on the date of George Dean’s first wedding anniversary, he was arrested for attempting to murder Mary, his 20-year-old wife and mother of his 10-week-old baby girl, this case aroused intense public interest. This screenplay dramatises those events, suggesting both a range of motivations for George Dean’s crime as well as emphasising Mary Dean’s vulnerability and bravery in the face of the prolonged domestic abuse she suffered. This screenplay is a result of sustained enquiry into the following research question: What forms of biographically-informed writing can express the lives of women who are not well represented in the documentary archive?

Biographical note:

Professor Donna Lee Brien, PhD, is Professor of Creative Industries in the School of Education and the Arts at Central Queensland University. She has published over two hundred and fifty scholarly book chapters, journal articles and creative works, many about biography and other sub-genres of life writing. Her recent books on the subject include: *Forgotten Lives: Recovering Lost Histories Through Fact and Fiction* (with Dallas Baker and Nike Sulway, Cambridge Scholars, 2017) and *Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice* (with Quinn Eades, UWAPublishing, 2018). Donna is the new co-editor of the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, and on the editorial board of a number of leading journals including *TEXT: The Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Scriptwriting as research – Dean, Mary – Dean, George – Speculative biography – Life writing

1. EXT. SYDNEY MONTAGE, ESTABLISHING - DAY

We watch and hear Sydney Harbour regress into the past.

The traffic-laden Harbour Bridge and raised Cahill Expressway, satellite-guided catamarans, helicopters and sleek jets give way to scenes from the 1960s baroquely finned-cars and heavier planes and ferries.

The ringtones of mobile phones give way to the beep of modem Internet connection and then train station announcements and then snatches of 1960s pop music.

Passing back through the 1960s to the 1930s, the Opera House and then Harbour Bridge are unbuilt and cars, trains, ferries, fashions and the accompanying traffic noise recede in time.

This change comes to rest on a late 19th century sepia vista of Circular Quay.

Smoke-belching steam ferries, horse-drawn carriages and parasol-shaded women bustle about their business to the boom of a ferry's horn and the clopping of hooves.

The sepia images follow a ferry across the shimmering harbour to the bustling transport hub of Milsons Point, then travel up a hill, past a series of shops and a few grand Victorian-style houses, to slow, and finally stop, on a modest double-storey terrace house.

We hear a horse tram's chiming bells, conductor's calls and rushing footsteps on cobblestone streets.

2. EXT. SYDNEY MONTAGE, ESTABLISHING - DAY

TITLE UP: SYDNEY 1894. THE HOTTEST SUMMER IN 100 YEARS.

Urban hum fades to suburban calm. A magpie can be heard but then fades.

A glimpse of silver sea can be seen beside the house. The small garden at the front is dry and neglected. A rose bush droops in the heat.

A lone cicada's chirp morphs into a regular mechanical click.

GEORGE DEAN, 27, dark haired, moustached, and rakishly handsome in his gold-braided ferry captain's uniform and hard brimmed navy-style cap, wheels his bicycle around the house and towards the street.

With each revolution of the tyre, the front tyre valve hits a dented mudguard with a click.

MARY DEAN (off screen) groans.

GEORGE frowns, stops, then bends and pulls the mudguard away from the tyres. He straightens and wheels the now quiet cycle to the gate.

GEORGE DEAN
(smiling)
That's it, my girl.

Mary Dean (off screen, louder) groans.

George's smile fades.

He scans the nearby houses, then with a quick glance up towards the house's balcony double doors, passes through the gate, and closes it behind him.

He mounts, pushes his cap firmly on his head, and cycles off, the mudguard clicking.

GEORGE DEAN
Blast. Blast. Blast!

3. INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY

The late afternoon sun streams in through grimy glass doors, the rickety balcony focusing the heat.

An image of a heroic rescue of women who had fell from a ferry, cut from an illustrated newspaper, curls and yellows on the wall.

On a small side-table, a dried bridal posy of rosebuds, tied with a faded ribbon, is surrounded with medicine bottles and pill vials.

MARY DEAN, 20, dark haired and willow slender, sits up in bed, holding her belly, her nightdress, stained with a watery brownish tide, sticks to her chest.

She listens intently as the bicycle's clicking speeds and then fades in the distance.

She grasps her belly and grits her teeth, groans. A BABY (in crib beside bed) starts to cry.

MARY

Help me. Help me. Somebody, please
help me.

The baby cries.

MRS SEYMOUR, puffing, enters, and picks up the baby.

MRS SEYMOUR

Mary?

MARY

Ohhhh. Mother...

MRS SEYMOUR

Oh no. Not again.

MARY

(retching)

Mother!

The sound of her vomiting morphs into the lapping of waves on
the quayside.

4. INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY, LATER

Through grimy glass doors, the sun is lower as evening
approaches. MARY is propped up in bed.

MRS SEYMOUR

Has the doctor been?

MARY

(weakly)

Not yet.

MRS SEYMOUR

I'll tidy up here, then I'm going
for Newmarch.

MARY

I'm feeling a bit...

MRS SEYMOUR

Not one word of your nonsense...

MARY

Ma...

MRS SEYMOUR

You know, I've never trusted
doctors...

Mrs Seymour rights the vials and pill bottles on the side table.

Mary reaches for the baby, holds her and kisses her.

MRS SEYMOUR

I've never trusted husbands either,
but don't get me started on that
topic.

MARY

No...

MRS SEYMOUR

Let me plump those pillows, girl.

The pillows plumped, she reaches towards the baby.

Mary moves the baby to her side.

MARY

Let me hold her...

MRS SEYMOUR

You need to rest. George will be
home in the morning and will need
his breakfast.

MARY

Alright Mother.

Mary lies back in bed as her mother continues to tidy in a whirlwind around her.

5. EXT. FRONT OF DEAN HOUSE - SUNRISE NEXT DAY

GEORGE, in uniform, cap on, softly humming popular song,
wheels the still clicking bike to the front of house.

GEORGE

Let's see how you are this morning,
my Mary.

He sees a shawl hanging on the door knob.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Blasted woman!

George turns and enters through front door.

6. INT. DEAN HOUSE FOYER - DAY, CONTINUOUS

GEORGE enters the house.

GEORGE
(shouting)
What are you doing here?

MRS SEYMOUR
(off screen)
She's all I have in the world.

GEORGE
She's my wife.

MRS SEYMOUR appears at the top of the stairs.

MRS SEYMOUR
(coming down stairs)
You have to look at the state she's
in.

GEORGE
(climbing stairs)
She's my wife. And this is my
house.

MRS SEYMOUR
Shush. The baby is asleep.

George tops the stairs and heads for Mary's bedroom.

CUT TO:

7. INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY, CONTINUOUS

GEORGE enters the bedroom, where MARY is still in bed. MRS SEYMOUR follows after him.

MARY
(sitting up)
George...

The BABY wakes and cries.

GEORGE
Not a word from you.

MARY
George...

GEORGE

I said not a word.

The baby's *cries build*.

MRS SEYMOUR

Don't speak to her like that.

GEORGE

Don't speak to me at all. I've said
I don't want you in my house.

MARY

(soothing baby)

She just...

GEORGE

Do. Not. Want. You. In. My. House.

MRS SEYMOUR

(to Mary)

I'll go love. For now.

GEORGE sits on the bed.

MARY

She's always been the same about
me.

GEORGE

Well, I'm here now. How about some
breakfast?

MARY

I don't really fancy...

GEORGE

You should eat something.

MARY

I've been so ill again.

GEORGE

A nice boiled egg? A tasty sausage?

MARY

Perhaps later.

GEORGE

Some toast? To settle your stomach?

MARY

Perhaps later, thank you.

GEORGE

Okay, you win. I'll make us some tea.

MARY

That set me off yesterday.

GEORGE

You have to have something, dear. A nice cuppa - we can have it together.

MARY

Alright, I'll try.

GEORGE

(springing up)

I'll be right back.

8. INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Mary is in bed. An older man, DOCTOR NEWMARCH is feeling her pulse. GEORGE is standing nearby.

DOCTOR NEWMARCH

And you're sure you haven't eaten any pork?

MARY

Yes. No. No, I mean I haven't.

NEWMARCH

Yes or no?

MARY

No, I mean, no I haven't.

NEWMARCH

No sausages?

MARY

No.

NEWMARCH

Tinned meat of any kind?

MARY

No, I haven't.

GEORGE

She hasn't, Doctor.

MARY

Just the beef tea... and the gruel
you suggested.

NEWMARCH

Ah, yes. Very suitable.

MARY

And some lemon cordial.

NEWMARCH

I can't see that would be a
problem.

GEORGE

(interrupting)

She can't keep anything down.

NEWMARCH

Then you must have mistaken my
instructions.

MARY

(starts to cry)

I don't think I did Doctor.

The doctor notices a cup and saucer on the bedside table.

NEWMARCH

And tea. You've had tea. After I
distinctly told you, NO tea.

GEORGE

I can't be here all the time,
Doctor.

NEWMARCH

Any hysteria in her family?

GEORGE

I don't think so.

NEWMARCH

Doesn't drink, does she?

MARY

(sobbing)

No!

GEORGE

(at same time)

No!

NEWMARCH

(to George)

No good you getting yourself all
upset, my Man.

GEORGE

Everything was all right until she
got with child. We used to get on
fine, but then... you know.

NEWMARCH

She'll come right.

GEORGE

I hope so.

NEWMARCH

Soon everything'll be back the way
it was... nice and cosy.

MARY

Doctor, I feel so poorly. All the
time. I'm just so low and the pain
is awful.

9. INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY, LATER.

Mary is still in bed. George is sitting on the side of the bed
beside her, helping her to drink from a glass.

GEORGE

My mother always said, stout for
nursing mums.

MARY

But the Doctor said...

GEORGE

Shhh. Drink up.

MARY

(sipping, spits it
out)

It's too bitter.

GEORGE

Smells all right.

MARY

Taste it.

GEORGE

I bought it for you. Especially for you. To build you up.

MARY

Please, taste it.

GEORGE

Just have another little sip. Go on. It's full of goodness, perfect for you.

MARY

It's too bitter.

GEORGE

Come on, Mary.

MARY

Why won't you taste it?

He throws the glass on the floor.

GEORGE

Alright then, it's just another big waste, if you won't drink it.

10. INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY, LATER AGAIN

GEORGE and MARY are in the bedroom. George hands Mary a cup of tea.

GEORGE

Try this.

MARY

But, Dr Newmarch...

GEORGE

Drink up, dear. It'll do you good.

MARY

(hesitating)

Alright, I'll try.

GEORGE

Come on now.

MARY

(looking into the cup)

It's too hot.

GEORGE takes the cup, and pours some tea into the saucer.

GEORGE
Here you go.

MARY
Could you get me some more sugar?

GEORGE
Of course

He leaves the room.

Mary gets out of bed, pours the tea into an empty bottle, but spills some.

MARY
Oh, no.

She tries to rub the drops on the floor dry with her feet.

MARY (CONT'D)
No. No. No.

She gets back into bed, puts the bottle under her pillow.

GEORGE returns, holding up a sugar bowl.

GEORGE
Here you are, as much sugar as
anyone could want.

MARY holds up the empty cup, groans.

MARY
But, oh George, now I feel sick
again.

GEORGE picks up the saucer, pours its contents into the cup.
He bends over to kiss Mary's cheek.

GEORGE
Try to get some rest.

He leaves the room.

MARY
(to baby in crib)
Shhhh, dear, Shhhh.

The front door slams.

MARY (CONT'D)

Hush. I think he's gone. Just let
Mummy check what she can see out
the window.

She peers out the window. The soft sound of George whistling
under his breath is heard, and the sound of him walking his
cycle away. Then his voice:

GEORGE (O/S)

Good job, George ol' boy.

MARY turns from the window and *picks up the baby*.

MARY

Shhh. Everything will be alright,
my darling. It has to be.

11. EXT. NORTH SYDNEY STREET - DAY, LATE AFTERNOON

MARY, with a basket over one arm and the BABY under the other,
comes out the front door. She has dressed hurriedly. A
clinking comes from the basket.

MARY

I just have to know. I. Have. To.
Know.

MARY makes her way along a noisy, busy street.

The street bustle and noise both oppresses and fascinates her.

She uses her body to protect the BABY and her basket from the
crowd surrounding her.

She perspires with the effort.

MARY

Once I know, I'll know what to do.

A DELIVERY BOY, laden with large packages and parcels, ducks
and weaves around the people on the footpath.

DELIVERY BOY

(jostling Mary)

Sorry, Missus.

MARY trips, almost falls out onto the roadway.

MARY

Oh God, help me. Somebody, help me.

DELIVERY BOY
(already rushing
away)

I said I was sorry, Missus.

Steadying herself, MARY clutches the BABY and the basket to her chest. In turning around, she knocks into a WOMAN. She drops what she is carrying, and scowls at Mary.

WOMAN
Oh, Pardon me!

The noise of the street rises.

12. INT. SMITH'S PHARMACY - DAY, CONTINUOUS

SMITH, the pharmacist, enters the space, is looking at a number of small bottles of pills in his hands, comparing them with each other, counting the number of pills inside.

MARY walks over to the counter. Smith looks up and nods at her. He raises his finger to tell her to wait, then continues his counting. Mary pulls the half-full lemon syrup bottle and the stoppered milk bottle, which is a third filled with tea, from her basket and stands waiting, with the bottles held slightly in front of her. Her hands are shaking, and she knocks one bottle against the other.

SMITH
(looking up, glowers)
Yes?

MARY
(steading the
bottles)
I wanted...

She raises the syrup bottle, hesitates, then places it back in her basket.

MARY (CONT'D)
...It's nothing.

SMITH turns back to his work.

Mary turns to leave, but changes her mind, again. She lifts the bottles out of the basket again, so that Smith has to look at them. When he sees them, she places them on the counter

MARY (CONT'D)
Sir?

Smith continues to wrap pills.

MARY

Sir...

SMITH

(looking up, his
hands still
wrapping)

Yes?

MARY

I was wondering if you could have
these...

Smith looks at the bottles, and he eyes Mary suspiciously.

MARY

...tested?

Smith wipes his eyes and hands with a handkerchief, and picks up the syrup bottle, eying Mary warily. He looks at the label, swirls the contents around and holds it up to the light. He looks from the bottle to Mary.

MARY

(perspiring and pale)

I would like to have these tested.

Smith looks at the label, removes the cork and gingerly sniffs the syrup.

SMITH

Smells like lemons. Lemon syrup,
like it says.

Mary looks imploringly at him. Her face is white.

Smith rests his thumb against the bottle's lip, tipping the bottle so a drop of syrup reaches his thumb. He touches his thumb to his tongue and considers a moment.

SMITH

(spitting on the
floor)

It's very bitter.

He spits again.

Mary is very pale. She looks as if she is about to faint.

SMITH
(sharply)
Have you been ill?

MARY
(nodding)
Terribly. Sir, I have been so
terribly ill.

SMITH
(corking the bottle)
You should take these to your
doctor.

Mary swoons and falls to the floor.

Smith comes around the counter with a small vial in his hand.
He puts this to Mary's nose.

SMITH
Just smelling salts, take a deep
breath.

MARY
(coughing and
spluttering)
Help me. You have to help me.

SMITH
(helping her sit up)
Alright then, I'll help you.

13. INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - DAY

MARY is sitting up in bed. She is holding one of the dried
roses from the bedside posy. Her empty basket can be seen
under the bed. The BABY sleeps in the crib beside the bed.

A sharp knock is heard.

MARY
(jumping)
What now?

She hears another sharp knock.

Mary gets out of bed, and picks up the BABY. She moves to the
double doors and looks out over the balcony.

A POLICEMAN stands on the doorstep.

GEORGE is standing in the doorway in his braces.

GEORGE
(rubbing sleep from
his eyes)
What the?

SARGEANT
George Dean?
(beat)
I asked, Sir, if you are George
Dean?

GEORGE
Yes. Yes, I am George Dean.

The policeman steps forward and takes him roughly by the arm.
George does not struggle.

GEORGE
Mary. Mary... What about my wife?
Mary?

MARY
Yes, what about me?

GEORGE
Mary?

Mary turns away and looks down at the baby.

MARY
And, more so, what about us now, my
dear one?

The POLICEMAN leads George Dean away.

14. INT. SITTING ROOM, DEAN HOUSE - DAY

A much older MARY and a REPORTER are sitting across from each other in the modest sitting room. The Reporter has a note pad. A cup of tea is perched in his lap. Mary has a cup of tea in her hands, which she sips from occasionally.

MARY

Although he later confessed to his solicitor that he had repeatedly dosed me with arsenic and strychnine, George was never found guilty of attempted murder, and was gaoled only for perjury. His lawyer, Richard Meagher, although complicit in the lies, was re-elected to State Parliament and later became Lord Mayor of Sydney.

(beat)

With remissions for good conduct, George served only nine years of his fourteen-year sentence. He had no further dealings with the police, and died a week after his sixty-sixth birthday.

(beat)

Both my baby and I completely recovered. As soon as I was strong enough, I divorced George and, in 1900, married a respectable storekeeper, becoming Mrs Mary Bridge. I had another two healthy children. My mother left Sydney to take over the license of a country hotel, and she too enjoyed good health until she died aged ninety. Most fortunately, we all escaped any further public notice after that.

(beat)

What motivated George's crime remains a mystery to me and everyone else, as does the question of why, although he poisoned me at least six times with those terrible corrosive poisons, he never used enough poison to kill me.

REPORTER

Extraordinary...

Mary sips her tea, and smiles.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END

Research statement

Research background

Biographical praxis is a practice-based mode of research in creative writing, resulting in various forms of biographical narrative that include written and filmed texts. Feminists and others have long argued the importance of producing biographies of women and other subjects not well represented in the archive. This screenplay is a result of sustained enquiry into the following research question: What forms of biographically-informed writing can express the lives of women who are not well represented in the documentary archive?

Research contribution

This screenplay utilises aspects of speculative biographical writing (Brien 2014, 2015) to create an accessible version of events in Sydney, Australia, 1894, which led to the criminal sensation known as ‘The Dean Case’: when ferry master George Dean was arrested for attempting to murder Mary, his 20-year-old wife and mother of his 10-week-old baby. Drawing on historical documentation including legal transcripts and contemporary newspaper reports, the screenplay combines fact and fiction to chart Mary’s actions during the days before her husband’s arrest. It does this in a deliberate way of seeking to emphasise both her vulnerability and bravery in the face of prolonged abuse, thus offering a new, subjective insight into the well-known crime case.

Research significance

Beyond the archive, there is very little extant biographical information on Mary Dean, and so this screenplay redresses gaps in knowledge about who, despite her centrality in the poisonings and the ensuing legal cases, she was. The screenplay was double blind peer reviewed for *TEXT*, a leading journal in the discipline of creative writing.

Works cited

Brien, DL 2014 “Welcome creative diversions”: experiment and innovation in recent biographical writing’ *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* 18 (1), at
<<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april14/brien.htm>> (accessed 3 May 2017)

Brien, DL 2015 ‘The facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination’: history, fiction and speculative biography’, *TEXT Special issue* 28, at
<<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue28/Brien.pdf>> (accessed 3 May 2017)