

Independent scholar

Maree Kimberley

Fleur

Biographical note:

Maree Kimberley is a writer and independent scholar. She has a Bachelor of Creative Industries, an MA and a PhD from Queensland University of Technology. Her creative-practice led PhD examined young adult fiction through a posthuman framework and her research interests include young adult fiction, speculative fiction, posthumanism and the intersections between the cultural representations of science, technology and posthumanism in young adult literature. She has published articles, short stories and a children's novella and her work has appeared in academic and literary journals including *Meanjin*, *Pure Slush*, *Metazen*, *Social Alternatives*, *MC Journal* and *The Human*, as well as several anthologies.

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I craned my neck and looked over my shoulder at the ink-black feathers stitched into my skin. The wings drooping from my shoulder blades weren't as impressive as I'd hoped. My stomach turned. Did they grieve at being separated from the majestic black crow pinned to the silver trolley beside me? Red-streaked white bone, hollowed where the crow's wings had been cut away from her joints, glinted under the surgery lights.

I'd expected the first sight of my own wings to be magical. I'd expected to be dizzy and euphoric, like I had at the sight of my first inked tattoo. Instead, the black wings seemed ridiculous, tacked onto my clumsy human body like an afterthought. They dragged at my back muscles with the weight of a sadness I could not shift.

'Careful, Tessa.' Dr Trust's voice sounded remote, although she stood behind me. 'The graft is at a delicate stage.'

'How long before they work?'

'Five or six weeks, perhaps. It depends on your body's ability to adapt but you're young and strong. I don't anticipate any problems.'

She inspected her work through her surgical magnifying loupe, and I flinched from the heat of her torch that burned into my skin.

'I'll get the nurse to dress the transplant site.'

She peeled off her silicon gloves then dropped them beside me onto the blue plastic sheet.

'She'll give you instructions for wound care. Make an appointment to see me in four weeks.'

Dr Trust's shoe covers hissed along the floor as she walked out of the procedure room and left me alone with the wingless bird.

The crow had been a beauty. From the start she'd stood out for the breadth of her glossy wings, the gleeful menace of her attacks against marauding mynah birds and the careful tenderness with which she picked at the soft belly of a defeated cane toad and fed its entrails to her young. In the room's quiet her breath scraped like claws on stones. Was it my job to euthanise her now the procedure was done? I reached out and stroked her fine black feathers. They were stiff and cold beneath my fingers. Inside her gaping beak, her tongue was blackened and dry.

I rubbed at the small hook-shaped scar under my chin, a reminder of the first time I'd tried to fly when I was two and a half years old. Jumping off tables and slides, swings and climbing frames, I was always looking for a way to stay in the air a little longer. My parents took me to diving classes, to gymnastics and skateboarding lessons. But there were too many rules and I wanted to *fly*. Then Dad went north, Mark moved in and my baby brother came and occupied Mum's time. I got into parkour, running up walls and jumping off buildings, and flying got a little bit closer. But I dreamed of having wings of my own, wings that would let me soar far above the schoolwork-homework-housework routine of everyday, and escape the thumped fists, slammed doors and words fat with anger of every night.

Now I had them; wings of my own.

A sob shuddered through me. I glanced down at the crow. The translucent membrane lids slid up over its hazel eyes, and in its vacant stare a slim shadow flickered. I sprang off the treatment bed, forearms clutched across my thumping heart, and searched the empty room while the crow's gasping breaths carried the rhythm of her name.

Fleur.

'Let's see 'em.' Powla tugged at the edge of my over-sized t-shirt.

I slapped her hand away. 'No one sees them until tomorrow night's show.'

She shot me a wounded look. 'Some teammate you are.'

'You're lucky I'm even talking to you after that stunt you pulled at breakfast.'

'But you love chilli.' Powla widened her eyes in mock innocence.

'Not when it's raw chilli seeds in my muesli, I don't. My mouth is still burning.'

'We were just trying to get you hot enough to strip off your –'

'I know,' I snapped. 'Everyone wants to see my wings but you just have to wait.'

'Just 'cause Ringmaster thinks you're god's gift.' Powla snatched her workout bag from the bench next to me. 'Everyone in the circus needs friends, Tessa. More than anyone else, *you* need to remember that.'

She stomped out of the dressing room, her long black braid thumping on her back, counting the beats of her anger.

My mood hadn't been good since the graft. It had healed well, and Dr Trust had given me clearance to perform. The wings had passed Ringmaster's inspection, too. Under the big top spotlights during a closed rehearsal, he'd stretched his thin lips in a smile of approval and whispered, 'Sensational.'

'You'll be the first flyer who can actually fly.'

He rubbed his hands together and I knew he was thinking about how much money I could make for him.

It had been my decision to get the wings, although Ringmaster had suggested it. After Fleur had gone, it was the only gift that would convince me to stay. Dr Trust worked for Ringmaster exclusively, attending to all one hundred and twenty of his circus performers. She didn't bother with small stuff like setting broken bones or stitching up wounds. Cosmetic enhancements were her specialty – body sculpting, bone implants, skin grafts – anything to make the Sky Circus performers stand out above all others. Wing implants were her latest offering, but the nature of the procedure meant that few could have them. And I had been the first in the circus to pass all the pre-surgery tests.

I turned side-on to the practice mirror and pulled up my t-shirt. The feathers shone with an inky glossiness, and the small red stitch marks had already faded to pinpricks. But when the feathers scraped against my skin with whispers and sighs of loss and

longing, not even Ringmaster's approval could ease the pangs that dragged at my body. My other grafts had been free of complications. The strip of snakeskin around my forearm hadn't come with troubled dreams. The bull-horn tips poking from my head didn't have me glimpsing coloured shadows. The tiny, glittering sapphires implanted along my eyebrows hadn't made me shiver under a cobweb-light touch when I was alone in an open space.

These strange imaginings were not something I wanted to discuss with Dr Trust or Ringmaster or anyone else.

My other donor animals had not caused such problems. But those grafts had been done when Fleur was still around. She'd said a little prayer for each of them, she told me once, to release their spirits. That way, she'd said, they would not bind themselves to me.

When that crow had hopped inside the cage, and turned her gleaming hazel eyes towards mine, I should have recognised her.

I should have known.

When the Sky Circus came to my town with their noise and colour and poster-promises of *Spectacular physical feats never before seen*, I almost didn't go to the show. But Fleur had begged me to go with her. She'd fallen in love with Queen Astoria, the reptile wrangler, who'd made a special appearance at the mall with her emerald python, Lovely. Queen Astoria had strutted across the small stage at the end of the food court in her high heels and tattooed-green face with Lovely draped around her torso like a scaly vine. She'd called my wide-eyed best friend up to the front and let her drape Lovely's cool, scaly flesh around her neck and arms.

Fleur had spread out her arms and beamed. She'd gestured with her graceful hands while the python's smooth muscled body slid around her fine frame and the crowd oohed and applauded. Afterwards, she'd begged for us to buy tickets for that night's show. I'd hesitated – the tickets were expensive – but Fleur's pleas were persuasive. Besides, anything that got me out of the house, away from Mum's tears and Mark's low, rumbling violence, was a bonus. Fleur gave the balding guy at the ticket booth her best smile, and got front row seats.

The noise of the big top crowd throbbed in my ears, a back beat to the pulses of pain surging across my shoulders.

It's all in my head. I spread out my wings and rustled them, as if I could shake off the pain like water droplets. The healed stitches stung, hot as green ant bites, and my eyes smarted with tears.

It's all in my head, it's all in my head, it's all in my head.

Afternoon rehearsal hadn't gone well. Each time I'd stretched my wings a sharp pain drove through the centre of my chest. My head thumped with the effort of concentration and I kept missing my steps, distracted by the faint *caw caw caw* that

scratched at my mind like a nagging earworm. Straight after, I'd gone for a check-up with Dr Trust. I lay down on my stomach on her examination bed and suffered the prods of her silicon-gloved hands around my shoulder blades.

'Spread them.'

I grimaced and stretched my wings.

'A little more.'

'I can't. It hurts.'

Her fingers pinched around where she'd stitched the wings to my flesh.

My muscles jumped in a spasm.

'Try now.'

I gritted my teeth and spread my wings as far as I dared. My skin prickled with heat that crept up the back of my neck and crawled across my scalp. Sweat trickled from my armpits.

'Sit up and face me.'

I moved slowly, trying not to give in to the panicked beating of my heart.

Dr Trust shone a torch into my eyes. 'Open your mouth, say *arrrr*.'

She checked the inside of my throat then felt the lymph nodes under my jaw and under my arms. She pressed her stethoscope against my chest. 'Big breath in.' The skin between her eyebrows creased in a small frown. 'Breathe out.' She shifted the instrument a little higher. 'And again.' She moved it around to my back, and pressed the cold metal in the space between my wings. 'And again. In and out.'

'What is it?' My voice squeaked.

'Everything is fine. Put your shirt back on.'

'But what about my heart?' I pressed my palm against my chest. 'It hurts, right here.'

'If there is any pain it is all in your head.' Dr Trust pursed her lips and tapped some notes into her pad. 'I'll be telling Ringmaster he can expect a stellar performance for your winged debut this evening. I suggest you do not mess up your *head* with matters of the *heart*.' She dismissed me with a flick of her hand.

Backstage, I waited for my call while the *caw caw caw* inside my head grew louder, competing with the cheers of the audience. I shivered, and pulled the silver cloak shrouding my wings close around me. When Ringmaster called my name, my hollow wing bones rattled with dread.

Fleur had clutched at my arm, giggly as a six-year-old, when we'd settled into our ringside seats. I hadn't believed her when she'd said she was running away but her back-pack was fat with clothes and make-up. When she'd looked at my small handbag, hardly big enough for my phone and wallet, she'd screwed up her mouth for a moment then shrugged.

‘What’s mine is yours,’ she’d said.

Fleur had chosen me as her best friend when we started school together. She’d come up to me while I was hanging upside down off the monkey bars, and asked me to play ponies. I’d never been friends with a girl before. Boys had never liked me much either because I beat them at almost everything. All through primary school and into high school, she’d clung to me, stuck by me no matter what other girls said about me. And the older we got the crazier her plans for our futures together became, so I should have known she wasn’t kidding about joining the circus.

Under the big top spotlights her wide hazel eyes had glittered with daring and mischief, and all the love I had in my scarred heart belonged to her. From the first pounding beat of the circus drum she’d sat forward in her chair, shoving fairy floss in her mouth between clapping and cheering and stamping her sneakers into the sawdust floor. She’d whooped as the ringmaster strode into the centre ring resplendent in red and black. She’d oohed when the silky palominos pranced and twirled. She’d laughed at the tall clown when he lost his pants and squealed when the bald one fell over his giant-sized feet. As each act came and went – the fire breathers, the jugglers, the acrobats – she’d squirmed forward to the edge of her seat, and waited for Queen Astoria to arrive.

Then the lights dimmed. The music slowed and softened. The crowd hushed as the ringmaster lowered his hands and called for complete quiet. Fleur’s breath quickened as the red velvet curtains parted and Queen Astoria swept onto the stage in a cloud of pale green smoke with Lovely coiled around her head like a crown.

‘This is it,’ Fleur had whispered in my ear. ‘This is my future.’

She’d clasped her fists to her heart and breathed out slowly. She’d muttered, too soft to hear, but her words had the rhythm of an incantation.

A twist of jealousy had pierced my heart.

When Queen Astoria circled the edge of the ring swirls of sequins sparkled across her costume. Through the spotlight-filtered smoke her bare arms and legs gleamed olive green. As she strode her stage, Lovely uncurled and slithered across Queen Astoria’s shoulders and around her outstretched arms. The emerald python’s sinewed body rippled, lush and serene as a rainforest, its forked blue tongue flicking lazily as it curled around its Queen. Music swelled as Lovely wrapped herself around Queen Astoria’s torso. She swayed her hips in a graceful dance as the python circled down around thighs, knees, calves and ankles until it reached the big top floor.

When its head swivelled around, its small marbled eyes turned towards Fleur.

From the high wire the people’s faces swam below me, a rippling network of small dark holes that flapped open and shut as the clowns removed the safety net. Many in the crowd fanned themselves with folded programs, and I imagined I could see my eye winking out from behind a glossy black wing on the program’s back cover. My face, a mask of silver greasepaint and black feathers, had been plastered on walls and poles around the town calling for witnesses to the *World Premiere of Branwen the*

Bird Woman. I powdered my hands and grabbed the rails that framed the platform, twenty metres above the sawdust. Sweat clogged the pores beneath my thick make-up. The black sequinned leotard itched my skin and darts of pain shot through my wing joints each time I drew in a breath.

Across the high wire, on the opposite platform, my two catchers avoided my gaze. My wing graft had not been a popular decision among the troupe, and more than once I'd heard the whispers. 'Does she think ... better than us ... hands might slip ... no one'd blame us,' hissed from behind caravan doors.

The clash of cymbals snapped me from my thoughts. The crowd looked up at me as Ringmaster's voice boomed around the big top.

'Ladeez and gentlemen, boys and girls, humans and animals and all those in between. I preezent to you ...'

At his hand signal the drums rolled. The spotlight blinded my eyes and burned into the white line running down the centre of my scalp. The crowd's roar boomed in my ears until they rang. My mouth dried. A foul-tasting crust coated my tongue.

'Branwen!' Ringmaster shouted above the noise of the crowd. 'Branwen the Bird Woman!'

My feet skipped out onto the middle of the highwire before my mind had the chance to stop them. Poised above the centre ring on trembling legs, my wings shook loose and spread out from my shoulder blades, feather tips fluttering despite the still air. If the crowd gasped, I didn't hear them. Whatever words Ringmaster spruiked, I was deaf to. All I could hear was the creaking rustle of my wings and a voice inside my head repeating

Murderer, murderer, murderer.

I closed my eyes. The wire slipped from under my feet.

From our first day, the circus folk had loved Fleur and tolerated me. Ringmaster, impressed with my skills at least, had slotted me straight into the trapeze troupe. Fleur, at Queen Astoria's request, was assigned as her assistant. But while Fleur eased into big top life, natural as a golden bell's curve, I seemed to break every rule in the big top code of behaviour. Every day I faced the critical eyes and closed mouths of the other trapeze artists. No matter how hard I worked, or what tricks I perfected, not one word of praise was bestowed on me yet Fleur could barge in mid-rehearsal and still be greeted with beaming smiles.

'Show-off,' I stabbed a knife into the jam pot as she sashayed around the mess one morning with Lovely's emerald body wrapped around her dainty shoulders.

'Grumpy bitch.' She slid onto the bench seat beside me and picked at the grapes in her bowl. 'Here, Lovely wants to give you a kiss.'

I scowled and turned away. It burned in my guts that the circus had brought Fleur's gift with animals to life. Scavenging crows tilted their heads at the sound of her voice

and dropped treasures at her feet. With a few whispers she could soothe a distressed filly, and Ringmaster's yapping terrier danced only for her.

Fleur laughed. 'You really are in a bad mood.' She tickled my side.

I slapped her hand away.

'I'm tired and I'm sore and my ankle's giving me hell.'

Fleur spread out her arms, palms towards the sun.

'It's a beautiful day, and we live in a circus. You have nothing to complain about.' She stroked Lovely's muscled body. 'Not a single thing.'

'You forget I train eight hours a day, pushing my body through pain, while you wander around flirting and joking. The circus isn't fun for *me*.'

'That's because you make it not fun.' She blew kisses to the plate-twirlers as they stopped and bowed low in front of her.

They adored her. Everyone in the circus adored her. I'd even seen Ringmaster's thin lips curve up in a genuine smile when she skipped past him. The churning in my guts bubbled and burned, shooting pains up into my chest. I jumped up.

'You make it impossible for me!' The words tumbled out of my mouth. 'I'm the talented one.' My voice screeched in the sudden silence. 'I'm the one who's supposed to be the star. I'm the one people are supposed to love. Not you!' I slammed my fists on the table.

Lovely hissed in fright. She coiled herself around Fleur's neck. Fleur grabbed at the python. Her eyes bulged in fear. I lunged at Lovely, tried to grip my hands around her thick body.

'Help me!' I screamed.

A knife-thrower rushed towards us, drawing her blade. The knife whistled past my cheek and sliced across the python's skin but Lovely's fear had hardened her muscle into weapon, constricting Fleur's throat, crushing her spinal cord.

The light in Fleur's eyes dimmed. Her lifeless face sagged towards her shoulder. As I sank to my knees, the knife thrower sliced off Lovely's head.

The crowd's screams became *aahhs* as the wings took control and lifted my body above the crowd. My feet and arms dangled, useless, while bird instinct flapped and glided and rode the subtle updrafts of the big top. The commands directing my brain and body were not mine and yet they manoeuvred sinew and muscle, forcing my arms to stretch out, my head to lift, my legs to lengthen and straighten.

The wings on my back were more than feathers and hollow bones. Grafting the crow's humerus onto my scapula transposed more than cells. Within those feathers and bones were memories and instincts – ancient and unbroken – that invaded every atom of my being and moulded it into something *other*, something *not-Tessa*. It tossed my body around the big top like a tin can in a cyclone, while below me the crowd oohed and aaahed and clapped and cheered and Ringmaster shouted praise.

Horns blared. Cymbals clashed. The bass drum boomed while up, up, the wings flew. My body hung from the wings, helpless as a mouse gripped in a hawk's talons, while they flapped and glided up through the hole at the big top's peak and out into the night sky. The shouts from the tent below faded. Wind rushed through my ears. Cold air chilled my skin. My oily feathers kept up their steady beat until my body relaxed and stretched and the thrill of flight sang through my bones.

The wings claimed my mind as my best friend had claimed my heart, and their duet of the dead transformed me. Neither human nor bird, neither Tessa nor Fleur, I was born into a new thing as my winged body discovered its magic and soared through the ink-night sky smattered with stars.

And all the while, a voice whispered in my head.

Tomorrow, we go back to the circus.

Research statement

Research background

The adolescent body is, like the grotesque body, ‘at the interface of boundaries (human/animal, human/machine) that we are uncomfortable crossing’ (Ostry 2004: 231). By interrogating bodies that are altered to be other than human, the posthuman provides a space for young adults (YAs) to examine themselves in the process of transformation. Bradford et al. suggest that YA texts using posthuman ideas fall into three broad thematic groups: robotics and artificial intelligence stories; genetic engineering and cybernetics stories; and virtual reality narratives (2008). *Fleur* explores the biotechnology’s potential in a posthuman future through fiction, extending the author’s creative writing practice, which investigates posthuman forms created through amalgamating non-human biological matter and the human body via technology.

Research contribution

Fleur extends Bradford et al.’s second group of YA posthuman texts (genetic engineering/cybernetics) through its focus on biotechnology. The story explores the actions of, and consequences for, the protagonist in her journey towards agency through the synthesis of animal/friend/self.

Research significance

Fleur contributes to current discourses around the posthuman through its exploration of what it means to be human in a near-future biotechnological world. It examines mind/body dualism and Bradford et al.’s ‘dialogic interplay between cognition and body’ (2008: 178).

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