**La Trobe University**

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# Magpie wars

Abstract

Victorian writer Christie Nieman has wrought a quintessentially modern Australian fiction from the sentiment so eloquently expressed decades earlier in Aldo Leopold's *Round river* that 'one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds' (1993: 165). The human cost in a country where environmental care comes 200 years too late is measured in the small story of one rural woman's efforts to redress the harm with her own personal, self-sacrificing, and ultimately futile, action.

Biographical note

Christie Nieman is a Victorian writer, editor and researcher currently working towards a PhD in Creative Writing and Ecocriticism at La Trobe University. She is co-editor and co-author of the recent anthology *Just between us,* and her first novel, about traumatic grief, ecological disturbance, and a rare Australian bird, will be published by Pan Macmillan in 2014.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Ecology – Eco-fiction – Ecocriticism – Ecopoetics – Magpie

Life is replicating itself. Everywhere she looks. The wood ducks have a stream of small, downy followers as they climb the rocks by the river, the fairy-wrens are trailed by begging babies, larger and louder than the adults, and the walls of the house are alive with squeakings and scufflings, each day louder and more numerous. Even the big, slow blowflies she pursues from window to window, even *they* are found, when squashed, to be pregnant with wriggling, struggling life. She feeds them to the turtle in his tank. His eyes lock on, the wriggling abdomens an easy target on the still surface of the water. He is decisive, abrupt: his long neck shoots forward, his dog-clip jaws snap shut.

On weekends, when her husband is home, they scoop live mosquito-fish out of the river and drop them into the tank, and the turtle spends an hour chasing them and swallowing them alive-and-wriggling down his neck. They watch with satisfaction, feeling justified, even heroic, because their little turtle is a native species, and because the fish are aggressive interlopers; they eat native frogs' eggs, and fin nip native fish so that they can't swim and they sink to the bottom and suffocate. The fish are the bad guys of the story.

But they're not the only ones. She knows it. She feels it. She and her husband are an invasive species. They are a pest. They are the *real* pest; mosquito-fish are small fry. *They* owe the real debt to the land. To its creatures. The tiny fish pay with their lives. How should she pay?

She has decided, and he has agreed. They will do no more harm. They will not add to the burden. She will never be pregnant. They will not have children.

* * *

The river has reached a temperature which is just swimmable. When he gets home from his work in the city, they put on their wetsuits and gumboots and hold hands and walk down through the boot-slapping weeds to the edge. The water is still and deep. Suddenly deep. Once they stood on the bank and poked a wooden pole into the water only ten centimetres from the edge. They pushed it down as far as it would go. Over three metres the pole didn't touch the bottom. The river should be broad and warm and shallow, but the hundred-or-so years of land-clearing has meant that the river has cut itself so deep into the earth that it has stopped moving. When she stands on the edge she imagines a flowing, generous river moving slowly towards its wide open mouth, not this icy, tight-lipped pool.

She tries, when visitors sigh over the beauty of the place, to see how it looks through city eyes; eyes used to concrete. But all she sees is compromise: a river which will never know its natural form; bare earth and dusty sheep trails where there should be a chaotic tangle of sedge and flowering grasses; crops where there should be bush. She looks and sees a river that has died. The corpse of a landscape.

She stamps the reeds back from their launching place with her gumboots.
Hey Honey, she says, you want to see something funny?
Yes, he says.

My wetsuit is too small, she says and she squeezes her straight arms to her sides and then releases them, and they spring out away from her body, and bounce to a stop at a forty-five degree angle.

Hey, that *is* funny, he says.

It is baking hot in their black rubber wetsuits in the sun; there is no shade by the river, no trees. They kick off their gumboots and leap in, icy water finding its way through their zippers and seams to trickle over their skins and grow warm. Their wetsuits are ocean-grade and thick and the water is salty with groundwater, so they float, almost on top of the water. He dives and duck-dives with his snorkel mask on. He goes to the edge and puts on a weight belt so he can sink and investigate the steep edges of the river, looking for signs of life. She is alone, floating with her arms behind her head and her eyes closed. She hears the female wood duck speak to her mate and his higher pitched response. She wonders when the two young magpies will come down from their nest in the sugar gum so she can get a look at them.

He comes up spluttering.
An eel, he says.
How big?
Pretty big, not a baby.

All they ever see are eels. And mosquito larvae. And mosquito-fish. Nothing else though. No yabbies, no mites, no turtles, no leeches. It's too salty for leeches. Small mercies, she thinks.

He dives. She reclines, her body still and growing cold, and her face slowly burning in the late sun. He surfaces silently, spookily, right next to her. She laughs.

We need to get you a flat rock for your belly, he says, so that you can be like an otter and float there and crack open oysters on your tummy.

He makes a wild guzzling-oysters noise. She laughs again and throws her head back in the water so she can reach for him with her floating arms. He comes in close, seal skin against seal skin.

How good is requited love, he says.
Pretty bloody good.

Her flat belly, she thinks, as she hears the baby magpies calling from the top of the sugar gum.

They stand on the grass and peel down black skins, standing on one leg and then the other. She lies on the grass, tight rubber still gripping her ankles, and puts her legs in the air. He grabs her wetsuit and pulls. The suit snaps off, leg by leg, and she flops back on the grass. He sits beside her and pulls his leg towards himself and works the

rubber down his ankle and off his foot. He leaves the other foot ensconced and touches her stomach.

> Can I cook you dinner? he says.
> That'd be nice.
> Two wedge-tailed eagles circle up from a line of shelter-belt trees in the near distance.
> Do you think they're nesting? he says.
> I don't know. They look like a male and a female. But the conditions are no good, I think they don't breed in drought years. Maybe they're just hanging out.

They have kangaroo steaks with plum, soy and cinnamon, and steamed vegies. She tries not to think about the story she's been told about female kangaroos being shot inexpertly and the joeys bludgeoned and left where they are. Instead she imagines well-trained crack-shot hunters taking out the young males instantly and sustainably. She thinks about the soft feet of the roos, and their diet of native, drought-tolerant grasses, and about how she's reducing demand for the hard-hooved beef-cattle that tear up the ancient fragile Australian soil until it's good for nothing, not even thirsty-weed pastures. And the kangaroos are being culled anyway. The culling should be made useful. No waste.

The phone rings. She wants to ignore it, but he picks it up. He always picks it up. She thinks about becoming vegetarian, like the women at the office she works at part-time. Vegan they are, actually. But she's been to Koo-wee-rup. She's seen what should have been the Kakadu of the south, the wetlands that Victorians should have been able to boast about to the rest of the country, the rest of the world. She's seen the vast area drained and tamed for asparagus and strawberries, and the migratory birds that come from Korea and China to south-east Australia dwindling year by year. She puts the fork in her mouth and chews. One of the vegans looked shocked when she said she ate roo. She'd shaken her head and said, I wish you hadn't told me that, and then she'd turned to the other vegan and said, She eats cute furry animals. She'd wanted to throw bundles of asparagus at them and call them eco-vandals, but she just hung her head. They had simplicity on their side.

> He is handing her the phone.
> Gina, he says.
> But I'm eating.
> Talk to her. It's good for you.
> She puts down her fork but keeps her plate on her lap.
> Hello twin, she says.

They are not twins. They aren't even related. They found out on the first day of primary school that they had the same birthday, the same year, their Dads were both named Bob, and they both had dogs called Polly. And that was that.

> What are you doing tomorrow?

Um…
Come into the city and have a coffee.
She sighs, OK. They arrange place and time. She hangs up. He shouldn't have answered the phone.
How was she? he says.
Good. Catching up tomorrow.
Good. That's good, he says. Good.
In bed they hear the Boobook owl. They smile at each other in the dark.
We're being mopoked, he says.
We should stake out the hollow again. See if we can see it.
They wrap themselves in the doona and close their eyes.

In the morning he leaves and she goes back to sleep. When she wakes again, she hears the baby magpies in the sugar gum, calling for breakfast. The tea he left for her an hour ago has developed a tan-leather skin. The alarm clock radio has been conversing quietly with itself and the BBC world service has been filling her sleeping mind with images of Gaza.

She lies for a moment and then sits up and turns off the voices, and allows the stillness and the sound of birds to reclaim the room. Through the window she can see the female magpie sitting on a fence post, looking over the river. Another family of magpies forages on the opposite bank. The female eyes the family, and throws her head back, sending a blast of carolling their way. The magpies in the disputed zone throw back their heads and return fire, and then continue to forage. The female fluffs her feathers and carols again, but the family ignores her.

The male magpie is less pacific in his protest, and as she cycles up the dirt road driveway she is nearly driven into the fence as he makes contact with her helmet. She rides facing him, wobbling all over the gravel. He wipes his beak on a tree and glares at her.

She reaches the narrow bitumen road and rides six kilometres to the shop for the paper. She rides so fast her eyes stream. The people at the shop don't really know her. She's sure they recognise her, but they treat her like she's just passing through. And perhaps she is. They must see a lot of it, with the proximity to the city. Strangers buying up all the local land, and then commuting to work every day.

She rides back up the bitumen, slower, harder work; into the wind and on a slight incline. A Holden whizzes past her from behind, too close and too fast, and sucking her into its tailwind. She wobbles and pushes on, and only stops when she comes across the fresh body of an adolescent wood duck lying in the middle of the road. She lays her bike down in the grass at the shoulder of the road. She looks for traffic and then approaches the duck where it lies, to check if it's breathing. She hopes it isn't breathing. It is unmarked. There is no blood. It is hard to tell if it is breath or just the wind lifting the feathers. She slides her fingers between the bitumen and the feathers.

The bird is soft and warm: it feels alive. She lifts it and its head lolls as the long neck hangs down. A stream of blood flows from its bill to the road. She holds its chest against her ear, and then lifts its delicate head in her hand and brings it close to her eyes. No movement of breath disturbs the blood around the nostril. She carries the bird to the side of the road and lays it in the long grass, out of sight. She sits next to it, puts her hand firmly on the still body, tucking her fingers into the soft place under its wing, leans her cheek into her other hand, and waits for the feathers to grow cool.

She drives the car to the train station, letting herself off the hook because she's already cycled today. She feels safer on the bike; she's not going to kill anyone. In the car, her foot hovers over the brake, eyes on the magpies at the side of the road. Some of the magpie clans have their young down from the nests already, and the young are stupid about cars. They can't assess speed and trajectory the way their parents can. They can't do the calculations.

She should have cycled, but she didn't because she's just had a shower and she likes to feel fresh and clean when she sees Gina; it keeps the simmering childhood undertones at bay. She pulls into the station carpark – a patch of gravel in a withered paddock – and walks up the ramp to the old bluestone station, crunching broken glass underfoot. It must have been a beautiful building once. She's seen old pictures of it, bright as a button and with a staff of eleven moustachioed men staring unsmiling down the lens. But now it is completely unmanned and falling into disrepair. She sits on the bench in modern shelter on the platform. The speaker above her head crackles to life and a distorted voice from fifty kilometres away shouts something unintelligible to her, and she waits, not knowing if her train is coming.

The train, slightly late, passes through paddocks; bare paddock after bare paddock interrupted by the occasional fluorescent yellow square of canola. The conductor gives her a wink and a smile and they exchange a few half-joking, half-flirting comments as she buys her ticket. Every few hundred metres a brown falcon sits high on a power pole or a dead tree, waiting for scurrying field mice to give themselves away. She spots every bird, twisting to look at their dark tearstain markings, like rugby paint, as they recede in the distance. The outer suburbs of the city replace the open paddocks. Magpies are nesting here too. She sees them, high above the council-planted trees of the reserves and parks and nature strips, dive-bombing one another from nose-bleed heights at nose-bleed speeds. They can live anywhere. They procreate under any conditions. Well, they try. She admires them.

Twin! Gina calls from across the food court. She waves an arm.

They always meet at the market food court; the coffee's good, they can have lunch, talk, and then buy their fruit and veg. Well, this is what they tell each other. Really they meet here so they can go to the agri-section and look at the ducks and chooks and retell their country stories about each other, about run-ins with angry geese, and that

ugly but fascinating time Gina's horse stepped on the chook. Gina hasn't become *completely* citified.

She walks towards her friend, turning herself side-on, first one way and then the other, to sidle between chairs and prams and other pairs of women leaning in close over their coffees. She reaches Gina and dumps her bag on a chair. They don't kiss or hug like the other women, or even as she does with other friends. They've known each other too long and through too many stages for that.

Hang on a sec, she says. I'll go get caffienated before I sit down. She fishes her wallet out of her bag and sidles back through the prams and handbags to the coffee stand. She balances, cup in hand, back to the table, and on the way is nearly collected by a careering toddler. She finally falls into the chair opposite Gina.

> Christ almighty, she says.
> Cheers, says Gina, and they clink cups.

They talk politics and siblings and art and exhibitions, and property prices country versus city, and mental health country versus city, and work–life balance.

> She says, I'm hungry, some lunch?
> Gina says, I don't know if I'll have anything. I'm not feeling very well lately.

And she notices, finally, that the cup she clinked earlier was full of pale, innocuous herbal tea, not coffee.

> She raises an eyebrow. Is there perhaps, a particular reason for that?
> And a secret, proud smile appears on Gina's face, like nothing she's ever seen before.

They hug – awkwardly, but the occasion demands it. She hopes her face is registering excitement.

They peruse the crap on offer at the row-upon-row of fake-brand stalls in the general merchandise section, and she makes mock bodyguard moves around Gina's stomach whenever the crowd pushes in too close. Gina laughs. They reach the agri-section and look at the ducklings and the chickens falling over one another in their tiny cages, and suddenly she hates to see them like that. She hates it so much that she buys five ducklings and three chickens. She has no idea where she'll keep them. She shouldn't have bought them. The man puts them in a cardboard box with a plastic bag of feed, and hands the box to her. They walk on. She hugs the moving, squeaking box to her middle. Gina looks at her sideways.

> That was unexpected, Gina says.
> I guess I'll have to go, she says shifting the box in her arms.
> Gina taps the top of the box, Don't count them.

They almost hug again, but the box between them makes it impossible, so Gina waves goodbye, and she waves her little finger off the edge of the box in response.

She doesn't go to the station, she goes to his work and sits in reception with the whistling, scratching box on her knees, waiting for him to come down. She peers in the gap at the top. The little creatures scramble against the edges. They are afraid of her. She has so much power. She doesn't know what she is going to do with it yet.

He arrives, looking quizzical.
I thought we could catch the train together, she says.

He looks at the box. It scuffles and squeaks. He looks at his watch. I'll be fifteen, he says. Can you wait?

She waits. She puts her hand in the box and lets it lie still, and after a while the little birds forget to be afraid of it. A duckling climbs inside the curl of her fingers, pushing its downy, padded breast into the warmth of her palm.

He comes down again with his coat and his bag and sits next to her. They look into the box together. The birds panic again.

Where are we going to put them? he says.
I don't know. I'm sorry, I didn't think.
Doesn't matter now. We'll figure something out, he says.

They walk through the park to the station. She holds his hand, and with the other arm holds the box as steady as she can. Cyclists breeze past with eyes painted on the backs of their helmets and the magpies hesitate and then swoop anyway.

Gina's pregnant, she says.
The grip on her hand tightens momentarily.

On the train they open the box so the conductor can have a look. He whistles in low appreciation, and delight shows in his eyes. Other commuters sit up straighter in their seats so they can see over the cardboard edge. They smile. They can't help it.

She closes up the box and hugs it close and feels the movement of the baby birds against her tummy. She shouldn't have done it. The ducks will interbreed with the wild ducks, will reduce wild duck numbers. He stares out the window, and as the train passes from the busy outer-suburban clutter and into the openness of the barren paddocks, he looks suddenly worried. He leans in to her ear.

Did you take the pill? he whispers.

She nods, and he puts an arm around her, and she leans into the motion of the train as it carries them home to the dead river.

## Works cited

Leopold, Aldo 1993, *Round river*, New York: Oxford UP