

Representative Writing Samples of Writing

Sample One: FRANCES HODGKINS: A PRIVATE VIEWING (RANDOM HOUSE: NZ 2005), n.p.

PREFACE

As a biographer, I find it is the pursuit of life that thrills me most. More than just an act of researching and writing, it is a journey into someone else's heart and soul. It is an opportunity to slip for a time into someone else's shoes and take their path. A life when it ends is still poignantly resonant in things: letters written, works created, objects carried and loved, places lived in and visited. It is travelling through this physical and psychological landscape – collecting, thinking and seeing – that fires my writing.

I encountered my first letter by Frances Hodgkins in a small, dimly lit room in the basement of the Sarjeant Art Gallery in Wanganui. I was doing post-graduate research, reading archives. The cold winter's day was drawing in, and I was rushing. I had driven up from Christchurch, had my accommodation still to find and volumes of boxes of archives to read. Then I came across the letter, sealed in plastic as the special documents were. I knew it was written to Edith Collier, but I read on without realizing who it was from. The handwriting was difficult to decipher; tired and frustrated, I labored over some of the words. Then its meaning became clear and, realizing its significance, I glanced at the bottom and saw Frances Hodgkins's signature. It was one of those moments of excited discovery when the mind is wiped clear of tiredness and time. Focusing, I took in the encouraging tone, full of concern for the Wanganui artist whom she had recently taught in St Ives. I was moved by her strong, passionate words as she called on Collier to take heart in the midst of disappointments and struggle on, for struggle was the lot of an artist. Prophetically, she feared for Collier's return home to New Zealand and recommended only a temporary stay ...

Sample Two: THE SEARCH FOR ANNE PERRY (HARPERCOLLINS: Australasia, 2012/Canada, 2012 and SKYHORSE: USA, 2014/15/16), pp. 11-15.

Prelude

Meg hurried back from lunch. It was Thursday afternoon and the next day was her last in the office for two weeks. The weather was warming, and she and her partner, Pim, were going to Wales for their summer holiday. The lunch break had been a chance for them to quickly buy some lamps for their new home together. The day was hot and the streets fumed and noisy, with the hum of London traffic intermittently punctured by screeching sirens. The MBA Literary Agents Ltd office, on the corner of Fitzroy and Warren streets, was in a skinny, grey-brick building with white facings, a brown door with a large brass door handle, and a solid black iron railing.

Butted against it on one side was a garish little coffee shop, and above the brown door long, thin windows were stacked in pairs; in all, it was three storeys high with a tiny flat on top.

The office was open-plan, so coming through the door was to become immersed in the clack of keyboards, the screech and whirr of the fax machine, the ringing of telephones, and the relentless buzz of other people's conversations.

As Meg sat down at her desk, Sophie Gorell Barnes told her that a journalist from New Zealand had rung and would call back. Although this was odd — agents usually chased journalists — Meg gave it little more thought.

Two hours later, her telephone rang again. The woman on the end introduced herself as Lin Ferguson. Surprised to learn that Meg knew nothing about the Parker–Hulme case, she proceeded to tell her about two teenage girls, Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme, who had murdered the former girl’s mother in Christchurch in 1954. Then she said breathlessly, ‘And, I think Juliet Hulme is your client, Anne Perry.’

Meg exploded with laughter. It was too ridiculous for words. How could Juliet Hulme possibly be her author of 20 bestselling books, the matronly, ‘matching bag and shoes’ 55-year-old Anne Perry? Finally she recovered enough to say, ‘Come off it — I think you’ve got the wrong woman.’

‘Yeah. I guess I must have. Never mind,’ came a crestfallen voice from the other end, and the line went dead.

Meg recounted the conversation to everyone else in the office, and they all had a ‘fantastic laugh about the whole thing’.

‘It’s incredible,’ Meg gasped.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Sophie, laughing. ‘If you had really committed murder ... you’d become Jane Asher and be, like, “queen of cakes”. You’d become Delia Smith and be the “doyenne of cuisine”. You wouldn’t go and write grisly Victorian murder mysteries.’ The next morning, 29 July 1994, the telephone rang again and it was Lin Ferguson.

‘Actually,’ she said, ‘I think it is Anne, and we’re going to publish the story in the Sunday papers.’

‘Well, you think you’re going to, but you’re going to have an injunction in five minutes, so just stay by the phone.’ A furious Meg decided to ring Anne immediately, then their lawyer.

‘Look, I’m really sorry to bother you,’ she began her telephone call to Anne. ‘You know how I have to ask you if we’re going to involve a lawyer? I think we’re going to need to do that.’ She quickly outlined the ‘ridiculous story’ that Lin Ferguson had told her. ‘Can you believe it? There’s a film being made about this murder, and some people have got hold of this crazy idea that it’s you ... But we’re going to get an injunction.’

Meg’s words hit Anne Perry like the first wave of an atomic explosion. She felt physically sick. It had happened at last, the one thing in the world she feared the most. For a while she was almost senseless, listening but not hearing, the room receding and her head pounding like a drum. ‘I’m sorry, but you can’t ... You can’t refute it — because it’s true.’

There was a sharp intake of breath at the other end of the line. ‘I’m going to phone you back from a more private phone. I’m going to call you back in ten minutes.’

Ruth Needham, glancing up from her desk and noticing the expression on Meg’s face, shot off to Diana Tyler’s cupboard, poured a large Scotch and brought it back for her. Meg emptied the glass, steadied her nerves, then climbed the narrow staircase to the hush of MBA’s attic flat to ring Anne at her home in Portmahomack, in the Highlands of northeastern Scotland.

‘OK, I still love you. Now, you have to tell me about this.’ And so for the first time they had a proper conversation about Anne’s past, and things began to fall into place. The gaps in Anne’s life that Meg had wondered about, the late teenage years that evaporated in sickness, the furtive glossing-over of certain matters, the way Anne had always made questions disappear as if by sleight of hand — all this Meg had put down to Anne being Anne, but now she realized that it meant a whole lot more. Collecting herself, she began to strategize.

‘What we need is a lawyer to manage the press for us. This is going to be

big and we need expert advice.’ She told Anne to sit tight and talk only to her mother and her closest friend, Meg MacDonald. As soon as she got off the telephone, Meg rang their lawyer, who immediately gave her the contact details for Lynne Kirwin, a publicity agent who would help limit the media fallout.

Lynne Kirwin recommended a plan that she hoped would contain things and reduce the trauma for Anne. ‘Anne will have to do an interview for the [Daily] Telegraph, [as that’s] the paper in the UK where other journalists get their facts from. We’ll have one interview there telling the whole story, and Anne doesn’t need to talk to anyone else — we’ll just kill it dead right there.’¹

In this ‘huge crisis’, should Meg continue with her holiday plans to Wales, or cancel everything and go up to Portmahomack with a ‘shotgun picking off journalists and fielding phone calls’?² Finally, she decided to trust Lynne’s reassurances and go to Wales. If she had realized what was going to happen, she might well have changed her mind. As it was, Anne rang her every day she was away. Meg and Pim spent their first week at a bed-and-breakfast in an old farmhouse. There was only one public telephone, in the hall, and the good-natured staff would serve Meg’s cooked breakfast there, while she stood with the receiver in one hand and a fork in the other.

Anne was terrified she would lose everything — her friends, her career, her income and her house. Would it be a repeat of the past, with the same vilification? ‘Am I never to be forgiven?’³ She worried about her brother, Jonathan Hulme, and about the impact on his wife and young children. She feared, too, that the ordeal of having the past raked up again would kill her mother, now known as Marion Perry, who was then 82 years old and in poor health and living a kilometre or so away at Arn Gate Cottage. But when Anne went to tell her mother the news, Marion showed herself to be stronger than anyone could have imagined; she stood by her daughter in steely fashion. There was something cool, self-assured and calculating about Marion. In her day, her coiffed hair, perfect presentation and glamorous looks had hushed party conversation and stopped men mid-stride. Even in old age, something of the coquettish grace and elegance survived. She was clever at reading people, and past humiliation and social disgrace had made her more astute and determined not to give up the life she and her daughter had rebuilt. ‘There’s no place for tears. If there’s any crying, it’s to be done much later,’ she instructed Anne, and sent her back to her semi-restored stone barn ‘to draw up a list of friends and ... do battle’.⁴ Anne, who would not remember much of what she did during this time, sat down and worked out the people she should see in person, and those she must telephone.

Afterwards she had a conversation which remains vivid in her memory, and which she describes as the hardest thing she has ever done. She rang her friend and contemporary Peggy D’Inverno, proprietor of the village post office and general store, and asked her to come to the house. Anne told her that she and another schoolgirl had killed a woman in New Zealand in 1954, and that it would be all over the newspapers in the morning. This was the first time in 40 years that she had told her secret to anyone beyond her most intimate associates.

That evening she went to see the minister of her local Mormon Church in Invergordon and told him everything. She wept uncontrollably. They prayed together, and the minister predicted that she ‘would not lose a single friend’.⁵ Her faith was a consolation, but the task ahead was daunting. She had got to know people during her five years in the quiet provincial backwater of Portmahomack. How would they feel about her now? If they felt uncomfortable about her living in the village, she resolved to leave.

On 31 July, the story broke in the Sunday News in New Zealand, under the headline: ‘Murder She Wrote! Best-Selling British Author’s Grisly Kiwi Past Revealed’. Anne opened her curtains the morning after to see that ‘her driveway

was a sea of journalists from Australia and New Zealand, who had just got on the first plane [to the United Kingdom] and were now pointing with huge telephoto lenses', and that television crews were wandering over her property.⁶ Day and night the telephone ran hot with tabloid journalists soliciting her comment. One journalist who woke her swore 'on the life of his child' that he would not send the story out until it was approved, all the while faxing the article to his newspaper.

Anne would spend the next three days ringing the people on her list — family, friends and business associates. She would put long-distance calls through to the United States: to her editor, Leona Nevler; her New York book agent, Don Maass; her film and television agent in Hollywood, Ken Sherman; and her publicist, Kim Hovey. She had no idea how any of them would react, and she feared the worst.

Sample Two: THE SEARCH FOR ANNE PERRY (HARPERCOLLINS: Australasia, 2012/Canada, 2012 and SKYHORSE: USA, 2014/15/16), pp. 313-14.

... They also had an approach from me, in October 2009, proposing to write a biography of Anne. Meg sent an email to Vicki Mellor, Susanna Porter and Don Maass. 'I don't think this particular author is the right person. She's based in New Zealand, which will put Anne's hackles up. She's published a biography of Ngaio Marsh ... But it seems a good moment to review the issue of whether a biography of Anne would be a good thing now.'⁵⁰ In the end they decided that the timing was not right, and that a biography might well 'scare up a lot of discussion that we've all spent years trying to bury'.⁵¹

I received an email from Meg: 'Dear Joanne Drayton, I'm sorry to say that even Anne's publishers don't feel it's the right time for a biography, so we're putting this whole issue on the back-burner for the foreseeable future.'⁵²

I tried again on 28 April 2010: 'You may feel this is a case of what part of "no" don't you understand, but I am approaching you again to let you know I now have a confirmed contract with HarperCollins NZ to write a literary biography of Anne Perry. Once again I am writing to solicit your/her participation with this project.' The next day Meg replied with a short email requesting more information: 'Was there a proposal you sent to HarperCollins, perhaps?'⁵³ A day later my proposal arrived in her office at MBA. The concluding paragraph stated:

It is amazing to have discovered a voice for Juliet Hulme in the writing of Anne Perry, and New Zealand needs to listen. It is time to move out of the 1950s, the details of which have been frozen in time and ground over long enough. In today's context this is punitive and embarrassing. Anne Perry's life story needs to grow, to leave behind the terrible mistake of a young teenager and mature to acknowledge the remarkable adult contribution and achievements of one of the world's most well-known crime doyennes.

'Thanks, Joanne — this is very useful. I'll talk to Anne and get back to you as soon as possible,' Meg wrote when the proposal arrived. Then, 21 minutes later: 'Discussions have moved on more quickly than I anticipated. Can Anne and I meet you when you're here [in London] in the summer?'⁵⁴ ...

Sample Three: NGAIO MARSH: HER LIFE IN CRIME (HARPERCOLLINS: Australasia, 2008/UK, 2009), pp. 19-26.

Rain beat incessantly against the window. All weekend she had been alone in her flat, immersed in books and distracted imaginings. The late afternoon light was almost gone as she reached decisively for her mackintosh and umbrella. She was ready, as ready as she would ever be. Up the basement steps she hurtled and onto the London street. The last stragglers of the day dashed purposefully past her, as she pulled the collar of her coat tight around her neck and bent into the weather. She moved swiftly, a tall, dark figure etched by streetlamps against unfolding blackness. Outside the local stationer's she hesitated for an instant before thrusting into the smell 'of damp newsprint, cheap magazines, and wet people'. She bought 'six exercise books, a pencil and pencil sharpener and splashed back to the flat'. Against the wind that threw itself at walls and fingered its way around cracks, she heaped the coal fire in the grate and drew her chair closer. With pencil posed, and exercise book in her lap, she was prepared — for murder.

It was in this cramped room on a wintry day that Ngaio Marsh committed her first crime to paper. *A Man Lay Dead* was written quickly in a burst of beginner's energy. She filled the exercise books in a matter of weeks, and when her mother returned from a motor trip with friends even she was forced to accept that something remarkable had happened. 'I couldn't put it down,' she said. Up to this point, Rose Marsh's ambitions for her 36-year-old daughter had been theatrical, but in the deceptively clever intricacies of Ngaio's writing she glimpsed, if reluctantly, a new plot.

It was 1931, the Depression. The poor and unemployed queued for food and shelter in lines that grew longer by the day. But, in the cosseted circles of privilege, it was also the heyday of the flapper and the frivolous weekend murder party. Since her arrival in England two years earlier, Ngaio had been drawn into this world and it was the inspiration for her book. The people she met became models for her murderers and her bodies, and their haunts became her crime scenes.

On the hall floor at Frantock, Sir Hubert Handesley's country home, lies her first victim, with the blade of a ritual Russo-Mongolian dagger protruding from his back. The fortissimo bass voice of Doctor Tokareff singing Russian opera can be heard from an upstairs bedroom where he is dressing for dinner. Suddenly, the manor house is plunged into pitch-blackness. In his room, handsome Fleet Street journalist Nigel Bathgate strikes a match, which gives him sufficient light to find the landing and grope his way downstairs. 'The house was alive with the voices of the guests, calling, laughing, questioning . . . The sudden blaze from the chandelier was blinding. On the stairs Wilde, his wife, Tokareff, Handesley, and Angela all shrank from it.' Here it is, the stuff of nightmares, waiting to unleash chaos among the sports-car-driving, dress-for-dinner, horsey set. Stunned guests collect around the body.

Motive for murder abounds. For in life the corpse was a womanizer, a good looking, smooth-talking purveyor of envy. His girlfriend waited too long for their wedding; his mistress was an old school chum's wife. There will be few mourners at his funeral and even fewer who will find no silver lining in his coffin. But the measure of a man's character does not diminish the horror of murder. When a crime has been committed the perpetrator must be brought to justice, and few things galvanize the agencies of social control faster than a suspicious death. So the telephone call is made, and into this tight, almost claustrophobic plot walks the tall, distinguished figure of Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn.

He arrives by chance. The local superintendent is down with an acute

attack of gastric flu. Because of Sir Hubert's status and illustrious political career, the local office has been forced to appeal to Scotland Yard. Alleyn is thrilled to head the case.

'What's the matter with you?' Detective-Inspector Boys asked, noting his superior's enthusiasm. 'Has someone found you a job?'
'You've guessed my boyish secret. I've been given a murder to solve — aren't I a lucky little detective.'

Hurriedly, he assembles his 'flash' and 'dab' men — Detective Sergeant Smith with his Box Brownie and Detective Sergeant Bailey carrying his fingerprint apparatus; they head for a waiting car. Two hours later, Alleyn and his men are standing in the hall at Frantock.

The weekend party has assembled at Sir Hubert's manor house to play the Murder Game. Vassily Vassilyevitch, Sir Hubert's Russian retainer, was to give a scarlet plaque to whichever guest he chose to be the murderer. That person would have a day to hatch the heinous end of one of the guests by separating them from the crowd and saying, 'You're the corpse.' After the fatal words were uttered, the murderer would sound a primitive gong and turn the lights off at the main switch to symbolize the slaying. Darkness would last a minute or so before light and reason were restored in the form of a 'mock trial' with a 'judge' and a 'prosecuting attorney'. All of the party would have the right to cross-examine witnesses, including the murderer. But now the real corpse of Charles Rankin has been discovered with a blade driven into his heart. Shock overwhelms the party as they gather in the library the next day to hear Alleyn's words. He gives them strict instructions. No one is allowed to leave the grounds. 'I think the Murder Game should be played out. I propose that we hold the trial precisely as it was planned. I shall play the part of prosecuting attorney . . . For the moment there will be no judge.' He believes that playing the game will unravel the complexities of the crime and reveal its perpetrator. So the characters find themselves trapped inside a game inside a house until the murderer confesses.



When she arrived in England, Ngaio Marsh brought with her two chapters of a manuscript that she hoped would contain the genesis of the great New Zealand novel. She knew it was a literary challenge waiting to be taken up, and worked on it intermittently until London life lured her in a new creative direction. By the time she began her first detective novel, the genre was already well established. Its genesis was in Philadelphia in April 1841 when a young, impoverished editor named Edgar Allan Poe published an eerie tale called 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' in *Graham's Magazine*. That year, Poe was invited to head the magazine's editorial staff on the condition that he controlled his drunken mood swings. Under his talented and more temperate stewardship, '*Graham's* became the world's first mass-circulation magazine, leaping in a few short months from . . . five thousand readers to an unprecedented forty thousand'. Poe's detective stories developed in the crucible of professional success and modest acclaim. The three tales he wrote with the Chevalier Auguste Dupin as his sleuth became a blueprint for the genre's evolution, and Dupin was a watershed character in Poe's writing because he represented the victory of the rational mind over Poe's usual theme of terror. Dupin's intellect was fired by the fusion of opposites that Poe most admired: he was at once a visionary poet and a rational logician.

The aristocratic and eccentric Auguste Dupin was introduced by an anonymous narrator who became his sycophantic sidekick. This unequal

relationship set the pattern of the brilliantly omniscient detective dazzling his obtuse, slowwitted friend, who is the storyteller. Other conventions were established, such as the plodding constabulary who overlook all but the most obvious clues, the locked-room mystery, the innocent cast under suspicion, the elucidation of the criminal mind by appreciating the murderer's circumstances and motives, and the jaw-dropping dénouement that leaves everyone but the detective amazed. After solving the Rue Morgue murders, where, in a locked room, a corpse is discovered 'thrust head downward up a chimney', and an old woman's body is found frightfully mutilated, the subsequent crimes that perplex Auguste Dupin are smaller. In 'The Purloined Letter' he recovers stolen correspondence, and in 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' he establishes the fate of a murdered girl.

Poe set his detective stories in Paris, which encapsulated the Gothic and romantic traditions that inspired his work. Despite the notoriety that writing brought him, he remained a literary outsider in the United States, criticized for the blackness of his stories and for their European influence. He wrote out of ambition, but also to support his young wife, Virginia Clemm, who was dying of tuberculosis. She was his cousin, whom he had married when she was 13 years old. Stricken by grief and financial worry after her death, the destitute Poe drank heavily before dying prematurely in 1849. Ironically, when his own survival depended on the reason he so liberally instilled in Auguste Dupin, the archetypal sleuth vanished from his pages ...

Sample Four: NGAIO MARSH: HER LIFE IN CRIME (HARPERCOLLINS: Australasia, 2008/UK, 2009), pp. 415-416.

Epilogue

After the funeral arrangements for Ngaio were made, Sylvia Fox never went inside Marton Cottage again. Deborah Walton, who lived in the still-furnished house as a tenant, used to invite her over, but she never came and Walton went through the hedge to visit her. There were too many memories that Sylvia wanted to keep untouched, and of course there was the empty armchair opposite the desk. Sylvia sold her house in December 1985, and moved into a flat at Karitane Mews in Cashmere.

About a week before Sylvia died, Richard and Ginx Fox received a telephone call from Jean Esquilant to say that the end was close and that they needed to come down to Christchurch if they wanted to be with her. She died with her family around her on 6 October 1992.

Sylvia's funeral was held at St Augustine's Anglican church in Cashmere, and Elric Hooper gave a moving and amusing tribute. He told them how he used to say to his actors in rehearsal: 'Now, remember, that seat in the front is Miss Fox's, and she will be sitting there watching you.' Sylvia's nieces Sarah and Amanda were among her pallbearers, and as they carried the casket down the aisle they saw 'a beautiful black cat sitting in one of the pews and the cat got up and led Sylvia out'.

'She was really worried about where she was going to be buried . . . It was Simon [Acland and his sister-in-law Rosemary] who reassured Sylvia that yes, of course, when she died, she could be buried where Ngaio was out at the little church at Peel Forest.' Sylvia's ashes were carried out to Peel Forest by Richard, Ginx and a group of old friends, and Rosemary Acland took the committal service.

Sylvia's headstone is beside Ngaio's in the graveyard of the Church of the

Holy Innocents. They were the closest of friends, companions and neighbours in life and will be for eternity.

Sample Six: THE QUEEN'S MISTRESS [Unpublished memoir, finished October 2016]

PRELUDE

You probably know that Maori believe objects carry magic powers ...

I didn't learn this fact; I inhaled it. My family home was a bone-yard of objects. Mother dusted her fossil collection like other mothers tend their *lladro*. Normal was a moa's leg strung together with string, bone on bone, in the entrance hall. There were countless other objects: a musket; canon balls; a rusty prospector's pan, pick, and shovel; a wooden swingletree, or cross bar between horse teams, and a harness; a legion of colored and ceramic bottles, to say nothing of the Natural History section. All objects were on display. My childhood was not so much lived as curated. Home was a cabinet of curiosities and that by no means excluded the humans.

If they had met, my mother and modernist Mies van der Rohe would have murdered each other. 'Less was less', in mother's opinion, 'and more was simply better'.

This maxim did not so much define my growing up as disfigure it with clutter. There were objects everywhere: freestanding, fixed to the wall, in cabinets, on shelves, hanging from the roof. Even our toilet was a rotating installation.

But not all objects were equal in my household. Each had a story and a place in the march of time, but only a few were enchanted. Growing up, I knew exactly which objects were special, and which were not. The charmed were in a lockable cabinet – the finest, on cotton wool. They had mysterious powers and the cachet of being rare. These artifacts were the proud outcome of countless family expeditions to an ancient Maori Pa site at Purau, on Banks Peninsula.