

THIS IS NOT A THERAPY SESSION!

By Rachel Loveday

In my first creative writing class at uni, Alan Wearne, a well-renowned Australian poet who was our lecturer for that class said to us, “this is not a therapy session.” After making this statement, he elaborated, stressing to us that it was never a good idea to use our writing and our classmates to try and work through and/or solve our personal issues.

I do understand why he made that statement—as much as we all loved and cared for each other, no-one likes to be burdened or hear repeatedly about the problems that everyone else has in their personal lives. However in my second year of uni, I was copping one blow after another in my personal life: two deaths in one month, a family feud and several loved ones turning against me and my third year (last year) wasn’t much better. I did end up using my writing for comfort and therapy and to try and work through the issues that come with death and betrayal—I still am, I’ve discovered that for me and these particular circumstances, poetry is the most natural and cathartic way to express my feelings.

I am not using this article as a therapy session, merely trying to discuss and make a point. Is writing as therapy really a bad thing? Every author at one point or another would have contemplated this, if they have not tried or done so already. I personally believe that I wasn’t blessed with creativity and writing talent for no reason and that if it does help me cope with certain curveballs life throws at me, then I should be able to use it as therapy. Writers are always told to “write what they know”, so what better than to write from real life experience?

One good example that I have come across in recent years is New Zealand’s Helen Brown’s two books: *Cleo* and *After Cleo Came Jonah*. *Cleo* tells Brown’s story of how her two sons picked out a cat for a pet and a short time later, her eldest son Sam was hit by a car and killed. Cleo, whose name Sam had chosen, arrived at their house a few weeks after his death.

Brown's book tells the story of how Cleo helped her family heal from Sam's death and also how Cleo lived her life and affected her family, as she lived for over twenty years. Brown's second book *After Cleo Came Jonah* tells of how at first she refused to get another cat after Cleo's death, however she succumbed and bought Jonah, who was more rambunctious than Cleo, but proved to be healing after Cleo's death and during Brown's battle with breast cancer. Brown also parallels Jonah's story by talking about her daughter volunteering at a monastery in Sri Lanka.

I can't speak for Brown and I'm not 100 percent certain that she wrote both books for therapy; however I am certain that it would have been cathartic for her on some level. I'm sure it's possible the same could be said for others who have written biographies.

Another writing example of a different kind would be one of Australia's most successful singer-songwriters, Delta Goodrem. All four of her studio albums include songs she has written, talking specifically about certain areas of her life. "A Year Ago Today" was about the death of her aunt. "Be Strong" she wrote for her friend, Australian actress, Belinda Emmett who was battling cancer at the time. "God Laughs" was about her parents' divorce and "I'm not Ready" spoke of her sadness of her split from her long-time fiancé, Brian McFadden.

Both Helen Brown and Delta Goodrem have attained large amounts of success and popularity both through their writing talent and the content of their writing. My personal opinion is that, by writing about themselves and their lives, whether it's obvious that they're writing as therapy or not, or even if they are at all, it makes them more relatable to the reader and/or listener and therefore more likely to appreciate their work.

Whilst writing as therapy isn't for every writer, it has proven not only with Brown and Goodrem but with many other writers, such as myself, that it can provide a good amount of soul searching, life affirmation and professional success. As a writer, what more could you want or ask for?