**A shadow beneath the swell**

High above Redgate Beach is a lookout – more of a shrine, really – bedecked with a bronze plaque and several monochrome photos of the seascape below. One of the photos shows an arrow pointing to a vague shadow on the water: the shadow, according to the caption, marks the wreck of the S.S. *Georgette*. The ship lies a hundred metres from shore, five metres underwater, and what remains of her is sometimes visible in calm conditions.

But not today. The breakers are coming in at a cracking pace; the sea’s surface is white and foamy. There’s too much chop to see a shadow, not even the shadow of an object as imposing as a steamship’s hull.

What my eyes can’t see, my mind fills in. The story on the sign has me in thrall. I picture the events of the first of December 1876: a 16-year-old girl named Grace Bussell rides her horse into the pounding surf to rescue passengers and crew from the deck of the sinking ship. She and Aboriginal stockman Sam Isaacs persist in their dangerous mission until all fifty souls aboard are safely delivered to the shore.

It’s 2009, a summer’s day, post-school holidays, and the beach is quiet. Today is just an ordinary visit to a beach I’ve been to many times before. Hardly anyone is around. With the lookout all to myself I see something new in the signs, the plaque, and what they say about a young girl’s reckoning with the red rocks and blue turmoil below.

At first, I’m taken by the idea of Grace plunging into that shore break, dodging rocks, grasping the hands of drowning people, steadying a skittish stallion named Shiner – and then, as critical thinking kicks in, I’m gripped by curiosity and doubt. Something isn’t quite right. I’m no expert on horses, sinking ships and wild water…but could she have done this remarkable feat? What *really* happened when the *Georgette* ran aground in the bay below?

I’m in the grips of an Ancient Mariner story. The great Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood describes an Ancient Mariner story as a tale with the power to obsess the novelist “and torment them until they have grabbed a batch of unsuspecting Wedding Guests with their skinny hands, and held them with their glittering eyes or else their glittering prose, and told them a tale they cannot choose but hear.” \*

Standing at the Redgate Beach lookout, I have happened upon a tale I cannot choose but write. Call it a muse, a mainspring, or a spark of inspiration – this is the story that motivates me to start becoming the writer I want to be.

Over years of writing for media and corporate sectors, I’d had vague thoughts of becoming a novelist. Ideas for stories would come and go but nothing stuck; nothing impelled me to pick up the pen. I was always too busy. Writing would have to wait for a time when there was more time.

Fast-forward ten years and I’ve written my first novel – an historical novel – a re-imagining of the wreck of the *Georgette.* I’ve completed the project through a doctoral program at Curtin University. Of course, I could have tackled my project independently, but I’m glad I took the doctorate path. It gave me a framework of rigour, critique and discipline; milestones to meet, and a community of scholars I’m privileged to be part of.

Since then I’ve gained half a dozen years of experience teaching undergraduate writing units. My reading habits have broadened to authors and genres I’d never considered before.

I’ve written a second novel and I’m now researching a third. I haven’t become a well-known and celebrated novelist, but my writing practice is embedded in my daily life. It’s not a chore but a joy.

If I hadn’t gone to Redgate Beach that day, would I be writing novels now? That is imponderable. But I have learned that a writer’s inspiration can reside in the most shadowy of places.

\*From Margaret Atwood’s *In Search of Alias Grace*, University of Ottawa Press, 1996.

Caption:

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