

Tragedy, Rejection and Triple-Chocolate Biscuits— The Rewards of Perseverance

BY PENELOPE HANLEY

"But how are you going to depict the documented injustice and tragedy that has been the lot of talented women artists for centuries without your novel being one long wail of despair?"



This was the question my PhD supervisor asked when I told her my idea for a novel as the creative component accompanying my PhD's theoretical component.

Call me naïve, but I aimed to forge a plausibly happy ending for *After She Left*—even if it took me three generations to do it. The historical facts that inspired my idea were tragic: French sculptor Camille Claudel's life (trapped in an asylum for decades) and my grandmother's life, also of thwarted artistic talent (marriage to a gambler, five children in quick succession, a fall from a horse wrecking her back, a fire destroying her houseful of modernist paintings ...)

A series of *What if...? What if...?* questions kept surfacing in my mind when thinking about the initially spirited approach of both these women, and how their courage and creativity could have continued to animate their own lives and creative output, and could also have been a legacy enriching future generations. That didn't happen.

But it happens in my novel.

I knew, after I graduated in 2009, that a novel manuscript that pleased a handful of academics would not necessarily please a commercial publisher, but I began submitting it—and collecting enough rejection letters to paper the walls of my flat.

Did I become disheartened during those years as I worked my way through an ever-diminishing list of publishers?—Only briefly. I had a busy, stimulating professional and personal life, and I was also sustained by two things in particular.

Firstly, Tim Parks, a favourite and prolific writer, cheerfully told ABC radio interviewer Margaret Throsby that before he achieved success, his rejection letters could have papered the walls not just of his flat, but of Buckingham Palace.

Secondly, halfway through my decade of rejections, I was awarded a Varuna Fellowship to work with literary guru Peter Bishop on an historical novel manuscript. After some enlightening discussions with him, and sustained by Varuna chef Sheila's triple-chocolate biscuits, I rewrote the novel.

More rejections followed, though I came close with a couple of publishers.

During those years of rejections, I knew that all I needed was a publisher to take a chance on me and assign a simpatico editor to improve the structure of my manuscript. I have no trouble writing dialogue, inventing characters or developing plot. It's structure that has me floundering.

The last publisher I tried was Ventura/Impact Press. They made me an offer and assigned me an editor. She loved the novel, with its 'juicy plot and fascinating characters' but believed a restructure would strengthen it. I was all ears.

I've heard that a successful novel takes two people—a writer and an editor. Look at Fitzgerald and Hemingway's editor, the famous Max Perkins, who had "an infallible sense of structure"—a phrase I believe also applies to my editor.

She identified chapters that needed to be diminished, and voices that needed amplification.

I agreed. I'd spent nearly all my PhD time on the theoretical part, which does not come easily for me. I wasn't attached to my novel's structure

but had no idea how to improve it. The editor drew up a new potential structure.

It involved writing 22 new chapters of the same plot from a different point of view in a very short time. I drank too much coffee and ate too many triple-chocolate biscuits, but I did it. It was a delight to work with my own Max Perkins, sending drafts back and forth, re-checking facts and plausible possibilities for between-the-wars Sydney, and in general having a productive, stimulating time.

Of course, this was punctuated with some doubt and disagreement. To use Scott Fitzgerald's phrase, I'm a 'putter-inner' and the editor a 'taker-outer'. We had our tussles, but two minds on the structure led to a synergy that definitely strengthened the novel.

After She Left, published last May, did take a long time and many rewrites but my experience demonstrates why we must keep persevering even in the face of repeated rejection. There's joy in creating a novel. We're continuously improving our craft and though some of it is hard slog, we're always inching closer to success—and having fun along the way.

After my ten years of rejection letters, I came across the Latin proverb: "If there is no wind, row." With that attitude and with the help of triple-chocolate biscuits, we'll get there in the end.

Read an extract from *After She Left* on page 46.

EXTRACT

Penelope Hanley's *After She Left*



Maureen
August 1973

They were all in the kitchen—Maureen, Jimmy, Nessie, Steve and Melanie—when Keira came home and joined them.

"Too many cooks," Mel said, shooing them out except for Steve.

Keira asked what they'd been doing all day as they settled round the table in the adjoining dining room.

"Fixing some things around the house," said Jimmy.

"That's the landlord's job," said Keira.

"Does he do it?"

"No."

"That's okay, then. Did you notice Mum's cleaned the house from top to bottom?"

"Yeah, fantastic—thank you!"

"And I looked through your photos, Keira," said Maureen. "There are some lovely ones of Alan. I hadn't realised how serious it was until Saturday."

"Maybe I hadn't, either. But he was the first real grownup I've ever dated." Her voice was wistful. "He knows so much and it felt so right with him. I felt as if he took my hand and pulled me up to a higher plane—one of classical music, architecture, film, politics ..."

Maureen raised an eyebrow, appraising Keira for a moment. "But it was more than a type of teacher/student exchange, wasn't it?" she said.

"Mmmmm. It was the way he smells."

Jimmy burst out laughing and Maureen joined him. Keira gave a rueful laugh.

"Mum," said Keira, "you know I'm on the Pill, don't you?"

Maureen fished a cigarette out of her pack and lit it. "Better than having an illegitimate baby." Steve dashed in with fistfuls of cutlery and set the table while Maureen continued: "Specially with a man who wants to have his cake and eat it, too."

"Ah, a man after my own heart," said Steve, heading back to the kitchen where they heard the loud snap of a tea-towel on his jeans. "Ow! Just kidding, Mel!" said Steve and then yelled out, "Red or white wine, people, any preferences?"

"I drink anything," called Jimmy.

"Surprise us," said Maureen.

Keira continued. "That's simplistic though, Mum, to be fair, when Alan and I had agreed that jealousy's an old-fashioned concept of bourgeois possessiveness."

"You can have all the high-minded ideals you like about that but when it comes to love, the heart knows what it wants, and it generally doesn't want to share what it wants with someone else."

"The heart has its reasons that reason cannot know," said Steve, dashing in to put salt and pepper shakers on the table. "Pascal said that."

Mel came in with a dish of grated parmesan. She looked at Keira, enthusiasm sparkling in her blue eyes. "There's an article in Cleo about how to get over a break-up. It says you should buy a new dress, put on make-up and go out with anyone who asks, in fact, ask your exes out—anyone good-looking—if it's probable that you'll see your ex—your current ex."

"Yeah, Keir – never forget: there are plenty of fish and chips in the sea!" yelled Steve from the kitchen.

Nessie carried in a tray with six glasses on it and said, "No, Keir, you should throw yourself into your work—nothing better for the dark night of the soul."

"Don't elevate my pain to a philosophical crisis," said Keira, "I'm only going through a dark night of the heart." She sniffed an exaggerated theatrical sniff.

"I wouldn't dismiss your pain so lightly," said Nessie, "when jealousy hits someone who thought that jealousy was an outmoded bourgeois convention, that's a serious philosophical blow."

"It's not so much jealousy, but that he was dishonest for so long."

"How long?" asked Steve, sitting down next to Maureen with a bottle of claret and a corkscrew.

"I don't know. I was too angry to stick around and find out."

"Anger is therapeutic. It brings up repressed material." Steve extracted the cork with a loud *Thock!* "This is what you need." He sloshed the red liquid into a glass and thrust it towards Keira, who took it. "And as soon as you feel up to it," continued Steve, "go and see lots of comedies."

Keira burst into sobs.

Extract from *After She Left* by Penelope Hanley, published by Ventura Press in 2019, ISBN 9781925384840, \$29.99 RRP.

Penelope worked for two decades as an editor and is now a freelance writer. Her other publications include a novel and twenty short stories, as well as books commissioned: *Creative Lives: Personal Papers of Australian Artists and Writers* (NLA, 2009) and *Inspiring Australians: The First Fifty Years of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust* (ASP, 2015). She has a PhD in Communications from the University of Canberra and a BA (Hons) in English Literature from the Australian National University. She loves books, cinema, travel and dancing the Argentine tango.