QUT Digital Repository:
http://eprints.qut.edu.au/38927

Cantrell, Kate (2010) *The Certainty of Yellow.* In: Ignite10! Creative Industries Postgraduate Research Conference, October 27th - 29th, 2010, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. (Submitted (not yet accepted for publication))

© Copyright 2010 the author.

The Certainty of Yellow

Kate Cantrell

That afternoon, my parents stripped back the walls in the spare room and tried to agree on a colour. My mother, who had a mysterious attitude towards children, did not believe in finding out the sex of a child. My father thought this was strange since my mother hated surprises.

Once, before they were married, my parents got into a fight about what chicken nuggets were made of. My mother, who was an optimist, said it was white meat deep fried in hot fat with a little bit of corn flour. My father said it was cat. Later that night, my mother stood at the kitchen sink and stacked the cups and dishes. After a while she sighed and said, 'Those poor little kittens.' My father, who started to feel bad about the whole thing, snuck off to the bedroom. There he took off all his clothes except his socks and hid in the wardrobe. Inside, he saw the red knit gloves my mother snatched at a garage sale. He pulled one over his head. When my mother opened the doors, he jumped out with open hands and a sign that said, I'M SORRY.

My mother, who had excellent reflexes, punched him in the belly.

'I'm a chicken!' my father cried, falling to the floor.

'No,' my mother replied. 'You're an idiot.'

After they married, my mother's involuntary movements made competitive sports, like mixed netball, exciting endeavours. But they also made little things, like romantic gestures, difficult to stomach.

'Well it's definitely a boy,' my father said now. 'So what about the Amazon? We could paint some parrots on the wall and put a lion beside the bed. Jimmy did it for his boys. They got nightmares at first but then they liked it. They were scared of the monkeys, I think.'

'What if it's a girl?'

'No, it's definitely a boy,' my father repeated. 'And I think we should call him Don. I looked up Don on the internet. It means noble warrior.'

My mother nodded.

'Why don't we call him Tarzan?'

My father, who solved all his problems with formulas, did not play games of chance. He went to the casino twice a year and that was to balance their books. When he spoke, he shaped his sentences as numeric expressions with precise limits and values. The way he raised a point and followed it with an example shaped all his words as reasons. But in the spare room with open windows and plain walls, he miscalculated the probability of a daughter. It wasn't that he didn't want one. It was more that he had just finished reading a book called *Predicting and Influencing Gender*. Statistically, my father discovered, based on time of conception and the life span of sperm, a boy was far more likely.

A boy was far more likely to climb a broken drain pipe and rake leaves out of the gutter. A boy was more likely to drive a manual. At night before bed, a girl would set a mouse trap and slide it under the car seat, but only a boy would scrape off the blood and fur the next morning. At breakfast, a boy would eat sausages—cold or heated. A boy would grow to be tall. A tall boy could change a light bulb or pick a kite from a tree. In summer, when the fan blades broke, a boy would squeeze the pimples on his father's back, the ones in the curve above his pants.

'You know the ones,' my father said, waving his tweezers. 'Down there, where I can't reach.'

My mother was not so certain.

'No one's ever going to do that.'

My mother followed her sister into the world, but not without question. After she waved her off, she stayed back to stretch her legs out. Then she got used to the extra space and decided she might stay a while. For eight and a half minutes, in fact. When she finally emerged, fists clenched in protest, the Doctor hung her upside down and slapped her for keeping him waiting. Then a nurse carried her to the sink and washed her in a bowl of olive oil. Later, in a room with see through walls, my mother learnt on a shared feeding tube that she was NUMBER TWO.

My grandma, who also hated surprises but was Catholic, did not find out about my mother until she went into labour. One month earlier, she missed her ultrasound when a python got into the chook pen. At breakfast that morning, one of the boys found a feather in his milk and screamed, 'Penny's dead!' Another, who had recently learned to read, ran up and down the hallway yelling, 'The sky is falling! Someone here is next!' But up until the chickens were mangled, the scans all showed as normal. Normal was a relief for my grandmother, who was forty something and afraid of abnormalities.

‘The good news,’ the Doctor said, ‘is the baby’s heartbeat. The heartbeat is very strong.’

My grandmother tried a smile.

‘In fact,’ the Doctor said, ‘it’s one of the strongest I’ve seen.’

That afternoon, my grandfather went to cricket with the ultrasound in his pocket. He striped his face with thick sunscreen and raised the back of his collar. When the batsmen hit for six, he ran a little faster. For the first time since anyone could remember, he covered all the boundaries. At midday, when the sun rose above the pitch, the umpire called a drinks break. My grandfather squirted water on his face, and sweating, wiped his lip.

‘Look at this,’ he said, waving the scan. ‘Look what I’ve got.’

‘What the hell is that?’ someone asked.

‘It looks like a sea monkey.’

‘Or that thing from *Alien*.’

‘Or a baby octopus. Before you gut it. One with really long arms.’

My grandfather put the photo away.

‘Lucky you bowl better than you bat. If you know what I mean.’

The boys laughed.

My grandmother watched from the side.

The next morning, she admitted herself to hospital.

‘Something is wrong,’ she said.

The Doctor on duty ordered a series of blood tests, followed by a scan. The results, which were processed that afternoon, gave a standard reading: too many hormones and not enough haemoglobin. Normal for a woman at 36 weeks. But the scan, which was scheduled to confirm the above, revealed there were two babies, not one.

‘We’ve only seen a single heartbeat,’ the Doctor explained. ‘So it was impossible to know.’

‘They’re not Siamese, are they?’

The Doctor shook his head.

‘They’re not joined. At least, not in a physical sense.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, for some time now, they’ve kept this quite a secret.’

‘I don’t like secrets,’ my grandma said. ‘Mary had a secret and look how that turned out.’

The Doctor scratched his head.

‘Are they boys or girls?’

‘I’m not sure,’ he said, squinting at her stomach. ‘One’s hiding behind the other.’

As my grandmother was wheeled away, white faced and gown off her shoulder, she called my grandfather, who hurried to her side.

‘You need to go home,’ she said.

‘Is it the shirt? I’ll change it.’

She put her hand on his.

‘You need to go home and build another crib.’

Two weeks later, my grandmother brought the twins home from hospital and dressed them in whatever she could find. With three boys under seven, this usually meant blue sweaters and buttoned overalls with cuffs. In fact, it wasn’t until the babies grew eyelashes and curls that Mrs O’Donnell from Church, realised they were girls.

At mass on Sunday, the priest announced they would not be sending prayer parcels to the orphans of Somalia.

‘Charity,’ he said, ‘Sometimes starts at home.’

Before Communion, the altar boys, who almost looked like angels (except for the shoes beneath their robes), sent baskets around for collection. On the front of each was a typed message that said PLEASE GIVE: DONATIONS FOR THE LESS FORTUNATE. My grandmother, who often wondered where the less fortunate sat, looked sideways at her husband. He was still in his overalls and folded over asleep. Then she looked down the row at each of her children. Two of the boys, aware of her stare, were holding their hands in prayer gestures. The oldest, who had taken to sitting on the end, and as far from the family as possible, was carving his name into the wood. He was using the same knife he used to stab pigs. The smallest, whose pants were too big, was transferring coins out of the baskets and into his trouser pockets.

My grandmother slapped him on the wrist.

When the baskets were full, the Priest raised his hands and said, ‘Let us lift our prayers to the Lord.’

Christians, who generally make good people—the kind who bake casseroles for sick friends and sometimes shout 'Emu Parade!' in a dirty playground—forgot, for a second, the story of Jacob and Esau.

The next week, they loaded my grandparent's wagon with matching dresses and gloves.

'Julie-anne-and-Mary-anne,' they sang over the pram.

Even half their names were shared.

In fact, the only difference between the pair was shaped in that eight and a half minutes. One came out with a tuff of black hair, the other with curls as red as crayon. Later, when my mother was alone, she would look at a photo of them both, in hats that hid the difference, and wonder who she was.

That afternoon, my mother went to the paint store.

'I'm having a baby,' she said.

A woman nearby suggested yellow.

My mother nodded.

'Yellow is safe,' she said.

One of my favourite writers, Jeanette Winterson, often talks about the difficulty of discussing her own work. In her collected essays, *A Work of My Own,* she explains how the question 'What is your book about?' has always puzzled her. She says, 'It is about itself, and if I could have said it in any other words I would have.' The obvious irony here, of course, is that Winterson is saying in non-novel form that she won't say anything in non-novel form. But this, I think is indicative of the reluctance many writers have to talk about their writing process and to demystify it. But Winterson, (who once named herself as her favourite living author of all time) redeems herself a little when she talks about coming at her work sideways, through broader ideas about fiction and poetry and their place in the world.

In *Fires,* Raymond Carver also writes that literary influences are difficult to pin down. He then goes on to recall a very clear moment in a Laundry Mat in Iowa, when he realises that nothing that had ever happened to him could come anywhere close, could possibly be important to him, as the fact he had two children. And the fact he would always have them, he said, put himself (as both a father and a writer) in a position of unrelieved responsibility and permanent distraction.

I don't have kids (thank god) and I've never been to Iowa, but I think what Carver is talking about here are real influences—the kind that wake you up at 2am on some idle Tuesday morning. The greatest force that presses on my own writing is the past. Whenever I set out to write a story, no matter what that story is about, I am always pulled backwards: to my childhood, to my upbringing, to something that may have happened only the night before. I don't have the kind of memory that can bring entire conversations back to life. I can't rattle off facts and figures or dates and times. I can't remember the house I grew up in, but I can remember some small things: a tampon in the toilet, a mouse running down the stairs at night, my father talking to himself in the shower.

I remember once, when I was somewhere between four and five, I wrote a story about my mother sleeping for years. I gave her the story to read. A couple of weeks later, she gave it back to me and said, 'It's good, but it didn't happen.' A couple of weeks later, I overheard my mother on the phone to one of my Aunts. She was talking about the time after my sister was born, a time which she refers to simply as when she was 'unwell.' I heard her

say, ‘Well I don’t know how Kate could remember any of it. She was only six at the time.’

I like this idea of a story as something you over-hear. In fiction, as in life, it is possible to hold a secret, to know something you shouldn’t. At its worst, this kind of writing can be frustrating, but at its best it is rich and intimate. I find the toughest question I am asked, as someone who writes memoir, is ‘How much of this is true?’ But the question, I think, misses the point. This is because sometimes the facts of a story may not match up with the truth of the story, and an author may decide that the truth is more important. Another question that matters: what happens when I, as the author, explicitly acknowledge my own inability, or my own unwillingness, to tell the truth? Does this give me permission to tell a tall story? Is it ever okay for a writer of non-fiction to bend and stretch the truth?

If someone reads one of my stories and asks, ‘Did this happen?’, I would say yes. But if someone were to ask me, ‘Did this happen in the way you said it happened?’ I might have to say no.

One of the recurring culprits in my stories is memory, because memory is a device for forgetting as well as remembering. When memory is put on trial and called into question, it often lies. We manipulate our memories to include or omit certain things, just like when we are writing, we select what we want to tell the reader or what we want to hide. If you are writing memoir and you can’t remember what it felt like when you got electrocuted, for example, then of course you must invent the feeling.

All of this, I think, comes back to breaking rules.

I don’t want to tie myself in to a genre with formal rules. I think the fact a story must be published between two covers is limiting enough. I want to tell a story rather than report it. I want to write a story that is real even if it is fabricated. I don’t want to write a story that is tedious, or forced, or even academic.

I want to take a story to someone and say, ‘This is for you.’