

PURPLE PROSE

Liz Byrski and Rachel Robertson



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Introduction – Liz Byrski and Rachel Robertson

‘Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation ...’

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*

Purple Prose began with a conversation between two friends over a cup of tea in Liz’s herb-scented courtyard. One of us – Rachel – wanted to write about purple, but she couldn’t think how to do it. She didn’t think she could write a whole book about the colour. Then Liz suggested an anthology of women writing about purple, and we agreed that this could work and was something we wanted to do. We both have our own histories and associations with purple, but an important one was purple as a feminist colour and this was why we envisaged a book by women.

We went away to do some research on purple and found that it was just as interesting as we suspected. Culturally, purple is associated with many different things across different cultures, including penitence, mourning, harmony, royalty, feminism, women’s suffrage, lesbian, gay and transgender rights, wealth, healing, and spirituality.

There are a surprising number of purple flowers, vegetables, insects and animals. Creatures like the Indian purple frog, the purple heron, the purple queenfish and the purple sea urchin are all actually purple. There are purple minerals too: amethyst, porphyry, lavender chalcedony, lepidolite, purple jade, lavender jasper, purpurite, tanzanite. There is even a rare purple mineral first identified in Australia. Stichtite, a magnesium, chromium

carbonate-hydroxide, was discovered in Australia in 1891 and named in 1910.

Tyrian purple is a dye extracted from a mollusc found on the shores of the ancient city of Tyre in Phoenicia around the time of the Minoan civilisation. The difficulty of extracting the dye and the number of molluscs required meant that only rich people could use the dye, thus creating a connection between wealth or royalty and purple. The Chinese developed a synthetic purple barium copper silicate pigment, known as Han purple, as early as 1045 BCE and used it to colour beads, pottery, ceramics and wall paintings until the end of the Han Dynasty. More recently, the synthetic organic chemical dye, mauveine, was discovered by accident by Dr William Henry Perkin in 1856 while he was trying to make quinine.

In scientific terms, purple, unlike violet, is not one of the colours of the visible spectrum. Because it does not have its own wavelength of light, it is called a non-spectral colour. In colour theory, purple is a colour existing between violet and red (excluding violet and red themselves). But nowadays, violet, indigo, lilac and all other shades between red and blue are generally called purple. In discussing our anthology inspired by purple, we decided not to be constrained by specific varieties of or associations to the colour, but to give ourselves a free rein.

Once we had our theme, we had another conversation in another garden, this time over coffee with Georgia Richter, publisher and editor at Fremantle Press. We were delighted that Georgia was enthusiastic about our project. We approached some of our favourite women writers and asked them to contribute a piece of memoir or a personal essay inspired by purple. The writers we contacted were all people whose work we knew and admired and who we guessed would in some way respond to the idea of writing about the colour. The writers are diverse in age, background and life paths but still, we worried that we might receive lots of pieces about purple as a feminist and suffragette colour or about the book *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

Our worries were unnecessary. What was astounding to us was the diversity of responses to a single writing prompt. The way each woman approached the task and the way her personal life and purple intersect is remarkably different, and equally fascinating. But there are some themes that emerge from the collection. First there is the theme of transformation – how we change and how we struggle to change. We start the collection with a work that demonstrates the interwoven complexities of gender and identity, of change and continuity. We end the book with a very different exploration of transformation, the metamorphosis that occurs with experience and reflection.

Travel, through time and space, features in many of these works. Family stories, memory and forgetting emerge as women explore their roles as mothers, sisters, daughters and grand-daughters. Wisps of purple fabric rustle through the book in the probing of women's relationships with other family members. Several contributors reflect purple's connection to spirituality and others its strong link with loss. There are stories about childhood, about gender, and about ageing. Passions like football, art and pigeon-racing are also explored in this book. Contributors investigate the way we see the world and the way we write about this.

A year on from our initial conversation, we sat again with cups of tea, this time by Rachel's fish pond, and we read the fifteen contributions that make up this book. Apart from the colour purple, we recognised that each of these works is about how we make our lives into stories and how that makes our lives richer. Our conversation with each other has become a wider conversation with all our writers and, we hope, our readers.

Our final conversation is about the title. We originally used the working title of *Purple Prose* as a sort of joke, referring to over-elaborate or ornate writing. But one of the contributors alerts us to the fact that the phrase 'purple language' has been used to refer also to highly colourful swearing. We like the transgressive (and Shandyesque playfulness) of calling women's writing purple in

this way, so we decide to stick with *Purple Prose*. We hope readers will embrace the energy, the colour, and the stories to be found in this book.

The Things I Cannot Say – Natasha Lester

‘Bless you, my darling, and remember you are always in the heart – oh tucked so close there is no chance of escape – of your sister.’

Katherine Mansfield, *Collected Letters*

My favourite book as a girl was Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. I loved Amy March. In fact, I wanted to be Amy with her curly blonde hair, blue eyes, artistic temperament, delusions of grandeur and a house full of sisters.

On the cover of my thirty-five-year-old copy of *Little Women*, Amy is wearing a purple dress picked out with white polka dots, and a purple bonnet trimmed with white lace. Her sister Beth is also in purple, although her dress is more demure and covered with a housewifely apron. Purple in all its shades follows the sisters throughout the book; the slippers Beth embroiders for Mr Laurence are deep purple, Amy bequeaths Mr Laurence her purple box with looking glass when she writes out her will, Meg yearns for a violet silk dress, and Jo’s shabby poplin dress that she wears to the ball is deep maroon. It’s no wonder that when I think of purple, I think of *Little Women*. And when I think of *Little Women*, I think of sisters.

*

On weekends, from the time I was around six to the time I was eleven, my sister and I used to play with our dolls. We concocted elaborate games for our ratty collection of plastic children to participate in. One of our favourite games was hospitals. My sister

and I were the doctors, the dolls were the patients.

In an old indigo-covered school exercise book we wrote lengthy descriptions of invented diseases, accompanied by illustrations showing the manifestation of each disease in all its putrid glory. We gave the illnesses names like the deadly Gangalknee Virus and the frightening Amoebic Pustitis, which made one's throat swell to a point that the patient suffocated and died in a breathless purple fit. Each day of the weekend, my sister and I would walk down the rows of beds in our makeshift hospital. We examined each doll with our plastic tweezers, applied fraying bandages, consulted our diagnostic manual, treated those who could be saved and sighed over those who couldn't.

Our dolls would all recover or be resurrected by four o' clock Sunday because that was when pack-up time commenced. Even now, 4.00 pm on a Sunday still carries with it a sense of loss, of playtime prematurely shut down, of an exchange of the possibilities of imagination for the realities of homework, dinner and hair-washing. I always thought my sister felt the same as I about both the games and their cessation until she brutally announced, a couple of weeks after she started high school, that she didn't want to play with dolls any more. I was shocked. It had never occurred to me that doll-playing wasn't a lifetime's work. That the carefully drawn diagrams of disease would be left in a desk to yellow and fade, that the dolls would sit gathering dust in their hair until they were tossed away, too well-loved to be given to the poor.

It was the first time I felt bewildered by my sister's behaviour. It was the first time I felt absence as palpable, defined not just by what wasn't there – the camaraderie of playing together in our childish hospital – but also by what was there: a new person, a sister I was unacquainted with. Prior to that, we'd been exactly as I imagined sisters to be. We played together like Beth and Amy in *Little Women* with their own worn-out dolls. We fought together like Jo and Amy, except our battles were less devilish, consisting only of slapping one another until we both began to cry, rather than

burning manuscripts. We talked together about the complexities of the world – was God really everywhere, even in our mouths? – like Jo and Meg do after a night out dancing. We even had matching clothes and possessions, either because we both liked the same things or because it was easier for adults to assume that we did when they were buying for us.

For instance, my grandmother made us matching party dresses every year. I have a photograph of my sister and me wearing purple corduroy dresses, pink tights and maroon Mary-Jane shoes. We were both given a jewellery box for our birthdays that year, with a twirling ballerina on a circular stand. Mine played ‘Für Elise’. My sister’s played the theme from *Love Story*. How she must have hated the little-girlishness of it, the ballerina’s tulle skirt, the romantic cliché of the music and the lavender velvet lining of the jewellery box, designed to hide and protect everything from secrets to sequins. They were all the things I loved.

*

My brother lives a couple of hours out of the city. I rarely see him. For us to meet, I would have to drive to his house, taking my three children with me. I would have to leave them in the car while I knocked at my brother’s door for as long as it took him to cover his skin with trousers, socks, a long-sleeved shirt, mittens and a hat. It wouldn’t matter if it were forty degrees outside. He would still cover up.

I would not be allowed into his house. We would have a conversation in the doorway, with me trying to find out how he was in between shouting at my three-year-old not to pull his sisters’ hair. That is the best I could hope for. So I rarely invest the four-hour drive there and back for so little reward. He won’t answer the phone. He used to write letters, so we could correspond, but not any more. Occasionally, he will answer an email.

He is on antidepressants and antipsychotics, has been in and out of the psychiatric ward of the hospital three or four times

during the last year for anorexia and other problems, has not had a job for more than twelve years, has no friends, speaks to no one. He occupies his time planning and executing detailed combat manoeuvres against his bitter foes, Dirt and Germs, or cossetting his best friends, Imaginary Mortal Illnesses.

*

As I write this, it is as if I am inventing a character in a novel. My brother sounds like an oddity, a curiosity after whom people occasionally enquire with the same degree of interest that might be invoked by the discovery of a new breed of housefly. He is my children's uncle but they hardly know him. How do you explain, to a three, a five and a seven-year-old, that he thinks kids are a red-alert on the germ scale, second only to dogs?

But he isn't a curiosity, and despite the long drive, the indifferent reception I would receive, the complications my three children present, I know I should do more. Because my brother was, once upon a time, my sister. My best friend. The person I would have done anything for.

*

I watch my daughters play with their dolls. The handsome prince is being baked in the oven again because of some unspecified naughtiness. One of the girls is in charge of the roasting time, the other is preparing the dungeon, which is the poor prince's final resting place. They are taking turns to create the game, they giggle together at one another's ideas, they shriek at the fun of pretending to saw the prince's legs off with a plastic knife. My eldest daughter sneaks glances at me to see if I am about to step in and defend the prince and stop the game.

At one point, she hugs her sister and says, 'I love you, Audrey.'

As I watch, I wish for them a shared future of laughter, shrieking and camaraderie in sisterly adventures that involve such things as chopping up the limbs of feckless boyfriends. They will burn each

other's manuscripts but quench their hatred when one of them disappears beneath cracked ice. They will tramp through miles of mud when one is sick and far from home. They will push each other off a ledge, not just to see what happens, but to make the other see too, just as sisters do in stories, and sometimes, perhaps, in real life.

But I don't really know what sisters do in real life. Because I no longer have a sister. In her place, I have a brother. My sister became my brother about fifteen years ago, a transition that was both a surprise and not a surprise all at the same time. Because something was clearly wrong. She was withdrawn, antisocial, rarely worked, silent. She was locked in a body she hated, jailed by a gender she had not chosen.

How astonishing then, for someone who so rarely spoke, to make such a bold declaration to the world. Bold because, at the time, and still now, it was such a uncommon thing to do, to change gender. It was a thing not talked about, a thing thought by many to be deviant or taboo. I know this because I've seen the way people avoid speaking about my sister and my brother, as if the person she was and the person he has become have both ceased to exist.

*

I have left several selves behind me, selves I can hardly remember being. They are like the events connected to photographs in my childhood album – I know they existed because I have the evidence of them but I cannot imagine that I was ever that person.

These selves seem unconnected physically from me, although they linger in my memory: the fifteen-year-old girl so enamoured with what her friends thought that she had no opinions of her own; the twenty-five-year-old woman singing her heart out at a Robbie Williams concert at Wembley Stadium; the twenty-eight-year-old bride who had not yet encountered her own children and could therefore not imagine loving anyone else the way she loved her husband.

But my shearing off is metaphorical. I have not had to surgically remove those selves. They have slipped away with the passage of time, without causing me bodily injury. My brother has had to hollow himself out, to cut off the physical manifestations of the person he can no longer bear to be. He has had to be counselled, operated on, had to fill out dozens of pieces of paperwork and explain to countless organisations that he can no longer tick the 'female' box when it comes to expressing himself to the world. Because the world lets us know, in countless tiny ways, that we must always have a declared gender and that gender, once granted, is part of our personhood.

A sister, for instance, is a female person, a 'daughter of the same parents,' according to my *Macquarie Dictionary* in a typically unimaginative description. But what else is a sister? My intellectual self wants to run to the literature, to hide behind someone else's words and emotionless theories of sisterhood. Because then I would never have to say that when I found out my sister was going to live life as a man, my wedding was about a month away. My first thought was that people would encounter him in his men's clothes and with a dusky wash of stubble at my wedding for the first time and I would have to explain it. Why should I have to explain anything on a day that was supposed to be all about me?

As soon as I thought it, I pretended I hadn't and was horrified at my own selfishness. Because obviously my wedding was going to be the first of many occasions when my brother would find himself in a room full of people who would whisper about him but who would not ask him their questions directly. He was trapped in a new awkwardness, an awkwardness again not of his choosing. This time, the awkwardness was manifested by other people who wanted to study him but didn't know where to look, who wanted to brand him as confused or just plain weird, who wondered how anyone could do something so unimaginable, and who thanked God that their own siblings were 'normal'.

The awkwardness I felt was of a different kind. I wondered if I

could acknowledge what had happened, talk about it with him, ask him questions. But I was a reminder of what he used to be. I was attached to the person he wanted to leave behind. Talking about it with him reminded him of the girl he wanted to forget, the girl he hated. The girl he wished had never existed.

How can I be so selfish as to want to remember a sister my brother loathed?

*

I feel guilty for mourning my sister. Guilty because mourning implies sadness. I worry that being sad suggests I do not support my brother's decision. I should focus on what I've gained, not what I've lost. I should see the rainbow and not the rain. So I never grieved for her, in case that grief was misconstrued as grief over my brother's decision, rather than over loss. A person still exists who is made of the same atoms as my sister. So what is there to lament? Then I read Rebecca Goldstein's attempts to unpick the complexities of personal identity and it was a revelation. She articulates exactly what I could not: 'A person whom one has loved seems altogether too significant a thing to simply vanish altogether from the world. A person whom one loves is a world, just as one knows oneself to be a world. How can worlds like these simply cease altogether?'

Indeed, how can they? But they do. I know my sister has vanished, has ceased. She will never come again.

In *Little Women*, Beth's death is a 'benignant angel – not a phantom full of dread'. Birds sing over her soul. In dying, 'Beth was well at last.' I hoped that becoming a man would heal my sister, that her metaphorical death would be that same benignant angel. That my new brother would be able to have conversations with people, would be able to work, would even find love. I hoped it would tweezer out the pain of the previous twenty-five years of being thought of as one thing, the wrong thing. That it might bandage up the deep wounds caused by thousands of thoughtless actions – the

gifts of dresses and dolls and jewellery boxes from well-meaning relatives – and my own actions as a child in casting her as the ideal sister from a storybook, which was the exact opposite of who he wanted to be.

I wanted my brother to become someone who could smile occasionally, someone who would answer the telephone, someone who might venture outside into the sunshine. But that never happened. Instead he became more withdrawn, overcome with fears and phobias about dirt and illness, unable to eat, anorexic, declared mentally unable to work, alive only in the mechanical sense that his heart continues to beat and his brain stem allows him to perform the basic tasks of movement and breathing.

I've tried to do what I thought was right. I've put away the photos of my sister, I never speak about our childhood except in the vaguest possible terms, I tell everyone that I have two brothers and no sisters. On the rare occasions when I see him, I say hello and he nods at me. He doesn't speak, ever.

I wonder at what he cannot say.

*

'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,' Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* and the thinker in me understands the notion that gender is socially and culturally ascribed, whereas sex relates to the anatomical body one is born with. But gender is one of the primary labels we attach to people. We immediately identify people as woman or man based on the way they look. Ideas of gender are assumed to shift and change over time as society and culture changes, but, regardless, one's sex and one's gender are thought by most people to be fixed and the same. If someone looks like a man, they are assumed to be a man both physically and categorically.

To change one's gender – the M or F label they tick on a box on a form – and their sex – their physical body – requires medication, psychological assessments and staged surgery so that one's anatomy remains, for a time, in a state of flux. In fact it often remains forever

in a liminal space because the final stage of gender reassignment surgery is far too costly for most people, including my brother, to consider. But, as well as this, it requires a change of name on all documents validating one's identity. It requires new clothing, new hairdos. It requires everybody who knew what you once were to remember to use the pronoun 'he' rather than the pronoun 'she' and, after nearly thirty years, this is a hard habit to break.

How many times have I heard relatives, my parents, myself in the first few months, accidentally say 'she'. How it must have hurt my brother each time we did. But that is just one of the small shifts required. The bigger shift is to realise how hard it is for someone to change gender and sex, but still have the world treat them the same as anybody else.

If one is not born a woman, but then becomes a woman, that is the way our gendered society largely expects one will stay. These expectations have been so damaging to my already fragile brother. I imagine he sees how easily other categories in our lives can be changed – I shifted from marketer to writer, from daughter to mother – and these changes were celebrated, and even expected as part of my growing up. I announced the new label I was to give myself – 'I'm going to be a mum!' – we raised our glasses, moved on and no further explanations were required, the evidence of my children being enough to testify to my new state of being. But, fifteen years ago, nobody popped a champagne bottle to salute my brother's more courageous and more significant transformation.

In fact, for some people, my brother's decision to inhabit one box instead of another still has the dark cloak of a secret about it. Recently, my mum gave me some of the books we used to have as children, for me to pass on to my children. She opened the front cover of one, pointed to a white streak of liquid paper on the title page and said, 'I whited out her name.' (It was a book that had been my sister's.) My mum continued, 'Because you wouldn't be able to explain to your kids who this person was.'

In one sense, my mother was right. But she meant it in a different

way. She meant that explaining to my children that their uncle used to be a girl would be an impossible thing. Why? Kids are probably the best people to tell. They accept that almost anything is possible, even fairies.

My mother was right only in the sense that, for me, the fact I am still holding on to the sister I used to have is the one thing I cannot say.

*

I'm aware of how I must sound. As if I'm complaining, when it's my brother who has had so much more to bear. It's why I go along with the pretence that my whole childhood is an invention, a dream of weekend games, a story of lying beneath a purple quilt in a shared bedroom and having whispered conversations as we read the same Enid Blytons one after the other, about what boarding school might be like.

My games were played, my conversations were had with a ghost-girl who still haunts me. My sister is a secret I must keep close, hidden in my heart. It is the only place where I can stop pretending, where I can remember that once, long ago, my sister really did exist.

*

And then comes a breakthrough. My brother has moved back in with my parents for a short time. There is an issue to do with my parents' unwillingness to explain to some of their old friends the new state of things with my brother. Of course, it isn't a *new* state given it's been this way for fifteen years but my parents are still unable to talk about it.

I'm shocked. Driven by this, I reach out to my brother again and we begin an email correspondence. He asks what books my children would like for Christmas. I try to make sure he doesn't rush into a rental tenancy that isn't right for him. It is like thin ice, this correspondence. Shards of our renewed relationship might

break off at any moment. But there is also beauty reflected there, in the possibility of the ice strengthening, of not breaking, of a new world of love forming.