

## **Acknowledging ‘Self’ – A Practitioner’s Observations on Writing a Screenplay based on the Rodney Hall Novel, *Love Without Hope***

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### **Abstract**

When a novel is adapted into a film, the first stage of that process is the screenplay. The screenwriter considers ways to visualise the interiority of the novel such that it can be filmed and made visible. She writes for a small readership of technically proficient creative crew, such as the cinematographer, whose job it will be to visualise the internal of the screenplay words. As a trained cinematographer wanting to investigate this pre-production stage of filmmaking, I sought permission from one of Australia’s acclaimed novelists, Rodney Hall, to use his novel *Love Without Hope* to adapt into a feature length screenplay. What started as practice led research into how the interiority of a novel could be visualised, became a creative high jacking of Hall’s plot and characters, as I gave myself permission to follow threads in the novel that triggered something in me, not just as a woman, but also about my country, Australia, coming to terms with its past. This paper looks at creative practice and process, and the role of self in the decision making and emotional reactions to source material when adapting a novel to a screenplay

**Key words:** *Novel to Film Adaptation, Screenwriting, Cinematography, Visualising the Internal, Intermediality.*

### **Introduction**

When the twice Miles Franklin award winning Australian author, Rodney Hall, agreed to let me use his novel, *Love Without Hope* (2007), to write a feature length screenplay for my PhD practice led thesis, it did not take long for pleasure to turn into panic. Who was I to touch his words, let alone translate, adapt, and change them? Over a period of two years, as I worked full time as an academic, I shifted from writer in awe of the source material to acknowledging ‘myself’ in the process of adaptation, myself as a woman, myself in a country only just coming to terms with its past, and myself as a reader with permission to make the story my own. My training is in cinematography. As such I am familiar with the language of cinema and the tools of the cinematographer – the camera, moving or static, lens size, the frame, filters, depth of field,

film stock, grading and so on. Cinematography is a way of ‘writing with light’ (Storaro) and assists in the translation of key emotional moments within a film. My PhD investigates how the interiority of a character, including thoughts, mood, psychic states and emotions, as well as the interiority of an overarching theme or premise of the story, manages to travel through the collaborative stages of film making – from development, scriptwriting, pre-production, principal photography and postproduction – to the final screened film, when so many key creative crew are involved in these different stages. As a case study I used Anthony Minghella’s adaptation of *Cold Mountain* (2003), as practice led research I adapted Hall’s novel into a screenplay. I was interested in the role of screenwriter as it sits between the novel and the filmmakers. This paper looks at my creative practice process – as cinematographer turned screenwriter - what led me to write my own version of the story, and Hall’s thoughts on my second ‘unfaithful’ draft, all of which lead to my final draft.

*Love Without Hope* is a novel set at a time in Australia, the early 1980s, when the Department in Lunacy<sup>1</sup> still existed, and an old woman, Mrs. Shoddy, suffering a bout of depression with a messy house could be diagnosed with senile squalor syndrome and taken to an insane asylum to be ‘looked after.’ A sane woman imprisoned Mrs. Shoddy retreats into memories from her past. Here we find Martin, a lover who left her 30 years ago, and a man who did not know of his indigenous ancestry until he was a young adult. Throughout the novel we are never sure if Martin is real, or someone Mrs. Shoddy has imaged in her senile state. The novel is about memory, aging and what it means for a woman to age without a husband or children. It is set against the small-minded politics, real estate greed and claustrophobia of a tiny coastal town.

### **How a Cinematographer Reads**

I set out to adapt Hall’s novel having never adapted a novel before, and with the limited experience of writing two original feature length screenplays (un-produced). Choosing familiar territory, I chose to read the novel from the perspective of a cinematographer. Let me show you what I mean by reading as a cinematographer by beginning with two sentences taken directly from Hall’s novel: “The electric light snaps on, drowning her in a surveillance of dazzling atoms. She winces behind bird-lids” (Hall 25). This scene reveals Mrs. Shoddy, 72 years-old, strapped to a pallet in a straitjacket in an insane asylum. While Hall wasn’t writing for a film crew, there

are words in these sentences that nudge me. The word *surveillance* is like an instruction to a cinematographer. We know that different shot sizes – a wide shot, a close up, an extreme close up and so on – are a way of communicating to an audience a tone, mood or subtext, and can also act as visual metaphor. The size of the shot and the juxtaposition of it to another shot, via the edit, guides the viewer to ‘read’ the scene and comprehend, through the visuals, what is important and what needs to be interpreted so that, depending on the visual style and decisions of the filmmakers, the audience understands what the character is thinking, feeling, or how they may see the world, including how they see other characters. From this visual language, I knew that the line above, and particularly the word *surveillance*, would need a camera angle that evoked the sense of watching for the audience, a wide-angle lens, the position of the camera up high looking down on Mrs. Shoddy, the room fully lit by that *electric light*. Even the verb *snaps* adds to the feel of how this scene from the novel needs to be filmed; the abruptness of the light turning on, and how it drowns Mrs. Shoddy, blinds her with watching eyes she can’t see. That high angle camera, with the widest lens in the cinematographer’s toolkit, allows the entire room to be seen, the four corners exposed with light, nowhere to hide. And in the center, perhaps, the slab of a white sheeted bed – the white sheets supplied by the production designer to assist in the blinding surveillance light, for white bounces light around, whereas darker shades of material absorb light – is Mrs. Shoddy, tiny and restrained in her straitjacket.

The next sentence in Hall’s prose, *She winces behind bird-lids*, give clues to the cinematographer that there is nothing to see but Mrs. Shoddy’s face. What a close-up image of her face achieves is intimacy. The audience is jarred from seeing a vast wide shot of the room and all that it reveals, to suddenly having the next cut in the edit take them straight to Mrs. Shoddy’s face in close up, where the confines of the frame mean they have no option but to look at her, really look at her. The lines on her face, the dribble, perhaps, on her chin, the reaction she has to the bright light, all contributing to a physical reaction in the audience to experience, ideally, empathy with Mrs. Shoddy; for them to consider the idea of *that could be me*. As a cinematographer, I saw these images when I first read the lines in the novel, but as a screenwriter needing to adapt the novel, I found that after I saw the images I had to work back to make

meaning of them, to link them to the essence of the film, or at the very least to ensure that they contributed to the spine of the story and kept it moving.

### **How a Screenwriter Reads**

In 2016 I conducted an interview with screenwriter Felicity Packard. Packard is a multi-award-winning Australian screenwriter with a list of credits as writer and creative producer, including *Wolf Creek TV Mini-Series* (2016), *Janet King* (2016) and *Anzac Girls* (2014); she is also one of the feature screenwriters of the TV series *Underbelly* (2008 – 2013), writing eighteen episodes of the series.<sup>ii</sup> Both *Anzac Girls* and *Underbelly* were adaptations, in that they were based on original source material. I interviewed Packard to get an insight into how screenwriters read the source material when they are adapting, be it a book or real-life events via testimonies or interviews. Packard said the first read of the source material is to read for a story, to make sure there is one, she asks herself the question, can this story ‘be told in pictures’(Packard).

Once Packard decides there is a story, she identifies what key emotions the character triggers, for her. This is the interesting part of the reading process she does, for she acknowledges it is *her* reading of the story, *her* response to it that drives the way she will adapt and translate the story into a screenplay. ‘Screenwriting is an exercise in doing more with less’(Packard). For Packard, there might be a dozen emotions felt or experienced by the character in the story, and also by her as a reader of the source material, but she wants to identify the key one, the one that shows the ‘emotional heart’ of the character, as it allows her to ‘define the dramatic centre which will be explored, inverted, expanded’(Packard). The emotion triggered by the read could include *shame*, *joy* or *compassion*, each with its own nuance that would involve a different translation of the material into screenwriting words. By narrowing down these varied emotions of a story, the screenwriter finds the little that goes a long way, for much less of the source text is required and the culling, for Packard, begins with identifying the key emotion. If, for example, the emotion that stands out the most for the screenwriter-reader is *shame*, this then becomes the driving emotion of the character, and allows the screenwriter to eliminate the excess, trim the fat of too much plot or theme or emotion, and instead investigate the entire film, or TV series, or character, with this one emotion. It allows the screenwriter to dig deep into that emotion and explore the world of this character, the landscape, the way she sees the world and

those people in it, cinematically; it allows for the beginning of the idea of visualising that which is internal in the character. Packard's practice does not separate her own aesthetics and emotional reaction to the source material, and my process would also eventually do this, but not until I wrote the 'faithful' draft, first.

I began my search for the essence of Hall's novel by identifying key moments worth keeping that drove the plot. Inside these moments, I went further to find the line written by Hall that held, for me, the true purpose of that moment in the story, which would later become a scene in the screenplay. From the section of the novel I have quoted previously, in the asylum, I found what to keep and translate in the following sentence by Hall: "She struggles against the straps. But the only freedom to move is in the memory" (Hall 25). The sentence allowed me to move beyond imagining the shot sizes I saw as a cinematographer-reader, and allowed for a deeper understanding of the subject of my imagined coverage; the juxtaposed camera angles became more than just a jarring experience for the audience. The use of the close-up of Mrs. Shoddy (also known as Lorna in the novel and screenplay) became a reminder to the viewer that everything they had seen in a prior scene, or moments after this scene – of perhaps Martin, Lorna's lover as a youth, Lorna with her father, or on her farm with her horses when she was young and healthy – has stemmed from the mind and memory of this old woman. The interiority of the world of her memories would be represented by the limitations of the frame's confines; the viewer understanding that the flashbacks with their movement, vitality and space are sourced from the memories of this tired old face we see in close up. That within Mrs. Shoddy's memories there is freedom to move. The images I had created in particular shot sizes, as I read Hall's novel as a cinematographer, led to me see how as a screenwriter I could write for a film crew, trusting that their training and ability to analyse screenplays would be enough to hear what I was whispering to them in my screenplay. Let me unpack this idea a bit further.

A film audience is willing to be guided at the beginning of a film, and the filmmaker's role is to set a tone and style, as well as introduce key characters and thematic elements. As a screenwriter I was interested in how the images and their meanings in the film could enable the viewer to visualise the internal thoughts, feelings and motivations of a character, all without the aid of voice over telling the audience what the character is thinking. The images that came to me



as I read the prose of Hall's writing needed to have an emotional and physical response from the audience. I wrote a note to myself in the margins of page 25 of Hall's novel, where we first see Mrs. Shoddy strapped to a bed in the asylum. It said – *Contrast the constraint of the straitjacket to her life with her horses. Make the audience feel that comparison, make them shift in their seats uncomfortably, make them feel her constraint.* This note was the inspiration for the opening scene in the second draft I wrote (the one I call the 'Unfaithful Draft'). The scene shows the audience a young, beautiful and wild Lorna riding her horses on a deserted beach in the far south coast of NSW, she is free, uncontrolled, and strong. In the novel we are told Lorna has a natural way with horses, but are never given a description of what this looks like. I wanted that telling to become showing, wanted the audience to fully embrace the younger, fitter, freer Lorna and her skills as a horsewoman. As a way of bringing the audience from this idyllic past to the brutal present of being an old woman incarcerated in an asylum, the *thud, thud, thud*(Thwaites 2) of the horses' hooves on the hard wet sand soon becomes the stomping tread of someone coming towards Mrs. Shoddy in her imprisoned state. Using the visual language of cinema – the close tight static shot of Mrs. Shoddy's face in the asylum, versus the wide moving shot of the horses and her on the beach – the aim was to force the audience to comprehend the contrast of the past versus the present, to feel the constraint of Lorna's straitjacket versus her riding free and young with the horses.

Filmmakers never know if they get it right, but the language of cinema and the understanding of film language allow us to know what a particular coverage of a scene or sequence has, historically, had the potential to do. Screenwriters are not advised to write any camera angles, coverage, suggested lighting decisions in their screenplays, instead they must find, through the brevity of a few key words, a way to evoke mood, tone, and suggest coverage to the crew. Below are some of the passages from the opening scene of my screenplay, a dinkus is used to show where I have jumped to a different section.

EXT. DESERTED BEACH (THE PAST) MORNING  
YOUNG LORNA, 23, her hair long and flowing rides her  
MARE along a deserted beach. The thud, thud, thud of its hooves  
on the wet sand.  
Six HORSES follow behind her.  
Together they canter through the shallow water's edge.

The sun bright and warm.  
She begins to unsaddle it with skill and tenderness.  
The sounds of the girth being loosened loud.

A grunt of pain.

INT. CALM DOWN ROOM DAY  
LORNA 72, wild long hair, her frame thin, shouts a  
high pitched, out of control cry.

A card reads AUSTRALIA, 1983.

The room is small, no windows, a closed door.  
LORNA's arms are wrapped in a stained canvas straitjacket.

Her body strapped to a pallet in the middle of the room.

LORNA's face is fifthly, streaks of old tears smear her cheeks.  
She is worn out from trying to free herself.

LORNA  
Help! Please, someone help me!

Heavy footsteps on the other side of the door,  
coming closer.

Deep sounds, thud, thud, thud.

LORNA looks towards the door(Thwaites 1).

Each description of Lorna is confined by either what we see of her, or how she sees her world – *Lorna's arms; Lorna's face; Lorna looks* – suggesting shot sizes to the cinematographer.

### **Creative Practice Process – Interpretive Choices and Intermediality**

Some could consider my reading of Hall's novel as a feminist reading, and there is no doubt that I am a woman of that generation, but it is not just the feminist in me that read through and into, and possibly even invented meaning where none was intended, in a novel written by a male writer then in his sixties. There is also the non-indigenous Australian side of me that couldn't avoid the power of Hall's writing. Those two sides of me influenced my interpretive

choices, such that in the two-page chapter I will be discussing in a moment there was something that triggered my interest and I couldn't shake its power over me. I would also argue that my reading of the chapter and how I interpreted it is an example of intermediality<sup>iii</sup>, in that I was influenced by the plethora of media, from photographs, documentaries, paintings and other films that represented the injustice and incarceration of both indigenous people, and women in general, for doing nothing wrong except being themselves.<sup>iv</sup> As an educated film scholar and woman in my early fifties, the media material around these two subjects – the treatment of women, and first nation people in Australian history – cannot be separated from my interpretation of Hall's novel. What follows is the 'in-between' process of how I came to write my version of *Love Without Hope*.

### **The Female Ancient**

There is a beautiful chapter in Hall's novel, just two-pages long, that for me held the absolute essence and emotion of my reading of the novel. There are no chapter titles in Hall's novel, yet I call this chapter *The Female Ancient* and write it in italics as these are the words I wrote in my pencil margin notes to sum up this tiny chapter, perhaps alluding to the importance of the idea that it deserved to be a proper noun. In order to explain more of why this particular chapter resonated with me, and to go further to show how it influenced my screenwriting, I would like the reader to see Hall's words for themselves. The use of ellipsis is not from the original chapter, I have truncated the chapter for brevity's sake. This section of the novel comes directly after we have read about Olga, the community nurse who is responsible for Mrs. Shoddy's forced removal from her home, trespassing on Lorna's farm, which has just been sold to developers. Olga is spooked by the land, which she feels is 'alive', and can see her there.

The land breathes with contentment, weeds flowering along fence-lines where rusted relics of machinery sink into the soil.... The nurse has gone... She has driven off in a fury of dust.

The dust settles.

... Cliffs with their caves and mossy rocks echo a whipbird's cry.

The sky fills with spirits gathering to view the farm below, agitating the domesticated scene with speculations and swirling in their myriad inquisitiveness, elevated and murmurous, in the observance of a simple closure ritual – long awaited...This



gigantic female holds them, fluttering numerous as leaves in the forest, as a clan, crowded together and in no hurry: other intruders have not survived, but she has. They look down at her grass-clad form, half a kilometre long, and at the tiny squared irrelevance of house and yards set ceremonially on her head, at the horse trough held like a dish in her hand. They know with the knowing of two thousand generations – a vast and ever-tumbling avalanche of grief and laughter too cataclysmic to be confined – there is a heart here and the heart has not stopped beating, only half-buried by the soil and masquerading as bare peaceful folds of hillside.

Perhaps they sense, also, with the insight of belonging, an old woman who does not lie quiet under the exhaustion of age. Her spirit is among them. She is tomorrow's havoc (Hall 42-43).

The idea of the spirit of the land being a female ancient, or ancient female, a woman who, from above, can be seen lying in and on the land that Lorna's farm sits insignificantly on, *the tiny squared irrelevance of house and yards set ceremonially on her head, at the horse trough held like a dish in her hand*, was more than just a strikingly beautiful image. For me what resides in this two-page chapter is a reverence for both the female and indigenous ancestry, that *other intruders have not survived, but she has*, giving hope to the idea that no matter what occurs on this land, whether a bulldozer comes and destroys Lorna's old farm, the yards and horse trough, the ancient female *in no hurry* emerges in an *awakening* to perform a *simple closure ritual – long awaited*, that unearths a heart that *has not stopped beating, only half-buried by the soil masquerading as bare peaceful folds of hillside*. The use of the word *masquerading* in particular alluding to the lie that is the colonial's stamp, but also, I felt, to what is occurring with Lorna, not only how betrayed she has been by certain people in the town, who conspired to get her off her land and sent away, but how Lorna has betrayed herself and Martin's love. Through her memories in the asylum we learn that Martin left Lorna 30 years ago, however the details of why are never elaborated. This gap in the plot was an opportunity for me to enter the story and take it on a different path.

Linking the ancient female spirit who is in no hurry and can emerge at any time from underneath the soil, to *an old woman who does not lie quiet under the exhaustion of age*, says to the reader that both ancient females will not be buried, and in fact are *tomorrow's havoc*. What I

read in this chapter was the overwhelming power of love that can never be buried, and that has sustaining healing powers that are invisible to others. By acknowledging the indigenous history of the region in this short chapter, and linking it to Mrs. Shoddy, *an old woman who does not lie quiet*, Hall gave me the idea of pursuing this further. In the novel, when it is revealed to the reader that Martin's grandmother was indigenous (and so therefore is he) it was more fuel for me to follow this narrative thread as a possible alternative 'essence' of the novel. I began to read the novel with the aim of linking the references Hall had made to our first nation history and characters, and what these smaller sections of the novel were trying to say, beyond perhaps the politically correct nod, by the author, to the theme of this country's past and both land and persons being taken away against their will.

### **Permission to tell my own story**

In her feedback of my faithful first draft, one of my supervisors, Merlinda Bobis suggested I give myself 'permission to break away and tell your own story'.<sup>v</sup> In my conversation with Bobis, we spoke of the need to be wary of following this indigenous thread so as to avoid it being tokenistic. After this meeting I went home and wrote the heading, *Who is Martin?* for both of us agreed we were intrigued by this man and his role in Lorna's life, and also to find out more of who Lorna was as a younger woman, before age, loneliness and depression led her to be incarcerated. In one writing session I wrote four thousand words of back story for Martin and Lorna, as well as notes on structure and premise. Hall offered up very little about Martin, no doubt for the purpose of making the reader ponder if he is real, or an imagined lover of an old (mad) woman. I began with what he supplied (below), snippets of conversation; fragments of memory that Mrs. Shoddy in the asylum clings to in order to survive, for they still revealed much.

Martin neither denied his Aboriginal grandmother nor claimed her. The same with the law of the Koorie people. Without understanding it or living under it he left room for respect: room created by his extremely wary endorsement of the penal code brought by the British. The translucent grey shadows modeling his white skin were the only visible inheritance Martin had from that side of his ancestry. (Hall 35)

Not long after this section in the novel, another character is introduced. Julie is an epileptic patient and Lorna's only friend in the asylum. Julie is described as having '...liquid black eyes set in a kindly round face, a woman whose cheeks have known laughter and whose skin is so brown as to be almost black'(Hall 35). Later in the novel Julie's heritage is confirmed when she says to Lorna, 'A month seems a long time to us fellows', and Lorna's internal thought ponders Julie's idea of time as 'An Aboriginal thing'(Hall 35). The Indigeneity of these two characters in Hall's novel were minor elements that sat at a distance from his main plot of the real estate deal to grab Lorna's farm. Yet for me, Martin's Aboriginal heritage and how Lorna attached no great significance to it, became something I could not leave behind. I was fascinated by what it meant for Martin to have this heritage, and what it meant for a young man who could pass as European in a small town in Australia in the mid to late 1940s (where the flashbacks are set) but who was in fact Aboriginal, to be loved by a white woman who in the novel is not affected by it one way or the other: "Blood is blood, necessary for life, that's all... I don't give a fig for my forebears ... so why should I bother about yours?"(Hall 71 [my ellipsis]).

It was this relationship, and the theme of the female ancient spirit in the land, which influenced and inspired me, and completely overtook my reading of the novel, at the cost of the real estate plot. Whilst the stealing of Lorna's farm and the town's involvement in putting her away is dramatic in its injustice (and still exists in the final draft), it did not trigger the emotional response the female ancient offered me in terms of making a cinematic version of Hall's novel, and as such sits in the background of the story. The idea of people finding out about their Aboriginal ancestry late in life in this country is not new, especially with the Stolen Generation's displacement of their ancestry. Yet I had not seen a film that explored a character finding out, as an adult, he had Aboriginal heritage, having never lived culturally, familiarly, or spiritually with an indigenous upbringing.<sup>vi</sup> This shift of focus from the original spine of Hall's novel meant creating new scenes, a new structure, new characters and a different premise.

### **White guilt and the character of Lorna**

As I began writing my second 'unfaithful draft,' another of Hall's fragments of memory through Mrs. Shoddy in the asylum worked its way into my thinking. Below is a line in the novel presenting Lorna's interior dialogue with an imagined Martin in the Punishment Room: "I knew

you would have to leave one day. What I have not been able to say to you is that I was going to suggest it anyway. You need your freedom” (Hall 35). It was from this line that I took a distinctly different path from Hall’s original material. In my screenplay it isn’t about Martin’s need for freedom that drives him away, it is that Lorna is not brave enough to pursue a life with what was then considered a ‘half-caste’ man in 1940s Australia. My version of Lorna’s relationship with Martin took on the white guilt that sits at the core of how I translated Hall’s novel. A guilt that Lorna, serving perhaps as a metaphor for non-Indigenous Australians, suppressed till the point of illness, all that she had done (all that we as a nation have done). It takes Lorna to be incarcerated and alone, her horses lost to her, her land almost gone, for her to fully remember, acknowledge and grieve her decision and participation in hers and Martin’s history. She remembers, and we the reader of the screenplay are given, the crisis moment in the film’s backstory, when Lorna makes the decision to ride one of her horses at the very early, dangerous stage of her pregnancy with Martin, in order to miscarry. None of this happens in the novel. There is no pregnancy, no sense of a marriage or how the town may or may not have dealt with this ‘half-caste’ man living with the daughter of one of the town’s ‘oldest white families’, no decision to miscarry and set in motion the rift between the lovers so that one of them leaves. Lorna chose a safe ‘white’ life over a complicated passionate one with Martin.

I made the decision that Lorna must be imprisoned, in a literal and psychological sense, for her to process and fully accept what she did in the past. I do not mean as some moral punishment for abortion – I see the self-induced miscarriage as a metaphor for the genocide we as a nation have in our history of our first nation people.<sup>vii</sup> Lorna’s acceptance is that she, unlike Martin, was not brave enough to embrace their relationship, and that the mores of the small town won over her love for him. It is only once she acknowledges her past, and most importantly, forgives herself for it, that she can accept that it is only the self that can determine what is suitable behaviour, not society, and that she was wrong. This is the premise I chose for the screenplay – how the individual has more power than they realise to change the attitudes and mores of a society. With the acceptance of her role in the past, Lorna finds peace and the strength to escape and head home.

When I first began writing on my process of turning Hall's novel into a screenplay, I truly believed it was my own version and interpretation of the Ancient Female chapter that had driven the version I created; however, this may not be true. There is one line in Hall's novel that on reading it again, many years after I completed the screenplay, I believe influenced me. It is in the same section where Lorna admits to her imagined Martin that she was going to ask him to leave. My copy of the novel is filled with coloured tabs marking important pages, underlined words, phrases circled, and notes in the margins, yet the line I found is un-marked by me. I had not identified it as anything important, and it was only a fluke that I found it years after the screenplay was finished. The sentence reads: "Had I taken myself captive already?" (Hall 116).

I ponder that even though I did not make any notes on this idea of imprisoning herself, the emotion of guilt and punishment in Hall's sentence sat with me during the years I wrote three drafts of the screenplay. Working its way through the reading and re-reading of the novel, and the writing and rewriting of the screenplay I suspect that it did, in fact, influence my interpretation of Hall's story. As it turns out, my version is not at all what Rodney Hall had intended me to do with his novel.

### **What Rodney Hall thought**

Late in 2011, I emailed my second draft (my 'unfaithful' version<sup>viii</sup>) to Rodney Hall. Below is the feedback he sent to me in an email a month or so later.<sup>ix</sup>

Well, to start with I do think you have achieved a script that will film very well. And your solution for how to end the film—emerging from the pool—is brilliant....

Having cut out the plot to defraud Mrs. Shoddy of her property, however, does give rise to a number of problems, as I see it . . . significantly affecting the audience's insight into the motives of the new doctor and, more basic even than this, maintaining clear awareness that Mrs. Shoddy is not mad (but that she cannot get out of the asylum without the intervention of a relative or a doctor).

I do understand film and the imperatives of film structure, so I can see what it is you are doing. I hope I am not one of those writers who think a novel can be exactly transposed to the screen. Still, as I'm sure you will agree, the essence of the novel can. In this case the essence is Mrs. Shoddy's heroic courage in clinging on to her sanity—this is what gives her stature. This is my sticking point.



If she doesn't clearly show this courage then it is no longer my book that is being adapted. So, her sanity needs to be clearly there. <sup>x</sup>

The email then consists of a dot point list of suggestions, including a useful one about how one of my new characters, a real estate agent, would use the word 'mozza' when referring to how much money Mrs. Shoddy's land would go for. Hall was not a fan of all my new characters, in particular that of Mrs. Parker, the old doc's wife. 'In my view the least convincing part of your script, Susan, is the Parker back story (Beatrice etc.)'. He felt it did not advance anything and that the 'screen time could be more efficiently used to set up the swindle that Mrs. Shoddy is to be put away so her property can be seized by the state and managed by an estate agent'.<sup>xi</sup> Hall did not mention my take on Martin and Lorna's relationship, and when I emailed and asked him what he thought of my version of Martin, I got no reply. I took on some of his comments about Lorna needing to be stronger, and less confused, to clarify to the audience her sanity and need to cling to it, as well as introduced a scene that indicates shock therapy without going too far visually. But my interests in the story had shifted from the plot of real estate fraud to the relationship and race issues of that time, including exploring what it meant to be a woman who cannot have children (Mrs. Parker/Beatrice) and a woman who chooses not to have children (Lorna). As such, I parted ways with Hall, whom I did not communicate with for another three years, as I continued teaching and researching my thesis, and completed the third and final draft of the screenplay. We conversed via email in mid 2015 to confirm the legalities of the publication of my screenplay of his novel in my thesis. By this point, a film company had bought the option to make a film of *Love Without Hope*<sup>xii</sup> and it was agreed that my screenplay was only to be used for the academic purposes of my research.

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to the screen adaptation of Rodney Hall's novel, *Love Without Hope*, my role cannot be separated from my position as a middle-aged non-indigenous woman of my time; an educated, independent feminist, who has juggled children and a career, and feels the great sorrow that my country is still grappling with and accepting responsibility for. I had the freedom, in adapting Hall's novel, to write what interested me in terms of how I chose to adapt and translate the novel, and how I wanted to make it cinematic. I had the added advantage of having

three supervisory readers at the Australian National University who were educated, independent feminists that encouraged and enjoyed my take on the story. If I were writing this screenplay in the ‘normal’ confines of the film industry, I would not have had that freedom, for whoever was paying my fee and decided to adapt the novel into a film, would have a huge influence on how I translated the story. It will be interesting to see the optioned version of Hall’s *Love Without Hope*, if it makes it all the way into production and distribution, and could lead to further analysis into the creative process of the novel to screen adaptation. Regardless of my version versus someone else’s version, or even Hall’s opinion of my version, it was Rodney Hall’s beautiful prose that inspired me to see visually, and to interpret the magic realism aspects of his writing, especially his *Ancient Female*, allowing me to create the screenplay I have written. Hall wrote of a world that exists where characters feel and see other characters that are not there. Julie knows more than she should, Lorna can see and be on her farm and know Olga is trespassing even though Lorna is strapped to a pallet in an asylum. Even Olga knows she is in Mrs. Shoddy’s dreams. Sitting underneath it all is the concept of the land and the ancestral female spirits that reside there, waiting, watching with a heart that ‘has not stopped beating’ (Hall 43). Hall set up a narrative that allows the reader to believe, if we choose, that miracles can happen, and that, despite the title of the novel, there is hope. Robert Bresson observes that when making an adaptation one must ‘find in the book what could be inside yourself, what corresponds with your own observations’ (Hayman 138). My reading of the novel is based on my personal interpretation of Hall’s original story, my emotional reaction to his prose, and it drove my translation of this screen adaptation.

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<sup>i</sup>NB: The title was Master in Lunacy, not, as expected, Master of Lunacy

<sup>ii</sup>[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt119176/fullcredits?ref=tt\\_q1\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt119176/fullcredits?ref=tt_q1_1) Retrieved 22/11/2019. Packard was also the writer and creative producer of the TV mini-series *Pine Gap* 2018

<sup>iii</sup>Intermediality as a study in its own right has some controversial aspects to it, Agnes Petho believes it is because of the ‘assumptions regarding the nature of mediality itself (Petho 1), unfortunately this paper does not have the space to go into it deeply. I address it here as it looks at what sits between media, both in terms of the literal and the conceptual, and it is the conceptual and implicit aspects of the study that, I believe, speak of the individual’s interpretive choices, their ideas and thoughts, as valid contributions of media. Much of the debate and complications around this field of study is the seemingly closer relationship intermediality has to intertextuality. For more see Kristeva, 1980; Petho, 2001; Rajewsky, 2005; and Bruhn Jensen, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup>For example, the photography and films of Tracy Moffitt, particularly *Night Cries* (1990) – the story of a white mother and her aboriginal daughter, simply for the mixed-race complications of the relationship and the aging woman in the film. <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/night-cries---a-rural-tragedy-1990/740/> Retrieved 22/11/2019

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A scene in Bruce Beresford's *Fringe Dwellers* (1986), a powerful scene where the young Aboriginal girl Trilby (Kristina Nehm) has given birth to an unwanted baby, and in a bathroom in the hospital the day of the birth, she just drops the baby on the tiled floor and it is killed. She doesn't get into trouble, as it is seen as an accident, however her intent to rid herself of this burden and all that it brings is clear. The scene preceding it is in the link supplied. I haven't seen this film since it came out in 1986, but that scene of Trilby dropping the baby surfaced when I was writing my version of the screenplay for *Love Without Hope*, and young Lorna's decision to rid herself of her unborn child was influenced by this 1980s film.

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/fringe-dwellers/clip3/> retrieved 17/10/2019

Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955) – with its representation of a young indigenous woman raised by a white woman on a cattle station in outback Australia.

Ivan Sen's beautiful *Beneath Clouds* (2002) where a young girl meets up with a young man escaped from prison and travel together – a scene where the young man, who is indigenous, realises the young girl is also indigenous, when an elder recognises her. Up until this moment he thought she was white.

Even the multiple personalities of the character Sybil in the film version I somehow saw of an American TV two-part episode of the same name (1976), it was released in Australia at some point in about 1979 as a feature film when I was a teenager. It was the first film I saw about mental health issues and the awful domestic abuse against a young woman by her mother, and how as an adult Sybil retreats into other personalities to hide from her past. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sybil\\_\(1976\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sybil_(1976_film)) retrieved 12/11/2019

Each of these films and images, the feel and affect they had on me as a teenager and then young woman surfaced as I became engaged in the world of Mrs Shoddy, both young and old.

<sup>v</sup> Email feedback on my first 'faithful' draft from creative writing supervisor at ANU, MerlindaBobis, March, 2011.

NB - Both Lucy Neave and MerlindaBobis have to be thanked for giving me 'permission' to write my own version of this story, to make something of the screenplay that was not in the novel, for I wouldn't have been brave enough to consider this was possible when I first began the adaptation.

<sup>vi</sup> Sally Morgan's novel, *My Place* (1987), is of course a significant contribution to literature and memoir that deals with this theme, but it has not been adapted for the screen, to date. Blackfella Films are making significant TV series and films that feature indigenous characters and stories, but, to date, I am not aware of one that features this scenario.

<sup>vii</sup> Writing now, in 2019, after the release of Bruce Pascoe's extraordinary book, *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*, which gives a completely different version of the so called 'hunter-gather' indigenous people prior to colonization, and the plethora of stories and information being uncovered on official and unofficial Aboriginal massacre sites across Australia – all of which sits on top of the grief and sorrow the Stolen Generation caused, I am aware Lorna's small world and small decisions are relatively meaningless, however this academic paper looks at practice and process, and the role of self in the decision and emotional reactions to source material when adapting a novel to a screenplay. I did, however, feel it important to note where we as a nation are now, what we are finding out, to where we were when I completed the third and final draft back in late 2014.

<sup>viii</sup> It took another three years after my correspondence and feedback with Hall to complete the third and final draft of the screenplay, in early 2014, then another few years of writing the thesis before submitting in 2017.

<sup>ix</sup> NB All punctuation, including ellipsis, dashes, brackets and underline, are Hall's. His reference to 'the pool' is the solution I came up with so as to never fully answer the question of if Martin is real or imagined, or to consider 'what now' in the story, by cutting back to a scene I had written earlier, in one of the flashbacks, where Martin and Lorna jump into a natural rock pool that was once an initiation place for boys into men (based on Mumbulla Falls on the far NSW south coast). In the scene they jump in but we cut before they emerge. Having them break the surface tension of the water at the end of the film, young and together, is about the audience not only staying with the younger, happier version of the couple, but also to consider the 'what if' aspect of this relationship, if it was another time, another country, a braver Lorna.

<sup>x</sup> Email from Rodney Hall, 2011

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> I never had a paid option with Hall, our agreement was 'free', in that he gave me permission to write the screenplay for my research, and when it was done we could consider the option stage then. There was no offer to have my screenplay considered. Such is life and creative differences. I don't regret my version, the creative process was astounding for me personally and professionally, as a writer and academic.

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