

# The Long Goodbye Teacher's Notes

P. J. PARKER

## A READER'S INTRODUCTION

'On the 28th of October, my father killed my mother'.

The Long Goodbye begins powerfully, in the present day, with Pamela mourning the death of her mother, Olive. 'From somewhere far away, the hall clock is doling out more hours, but I have slipped between heartbeats into a silence and a stillness inexpressible.' Pamela's anguish is compounded by the knowledge that her father, a campaigner for euthanasia, is responsible for her mother's death.

What follows is an incredibly moving account of Olive and Fred's story, and the story of their parents, siblings and children, as told through the eyes of their youngest daughter, Pammie. P.J. Parker writes of Olive and Fred's early lives growing up on in country Queensland in the 1930s, of the courtship that began in 1944 when Olive was just sixteen and of the marriage that followed when she turned twenty, the raising of a family and the opening of Olive's café in the 1960s. P.J. Parker takes the reader effortlessly into side stories of the fierce and brave Granny Chapman, her cousin Jan, and her sisters Robyn and Betty. We read, in glorious prose, about the Australian outback, and how it shaped the people who lived in it.

These stories, of three generations of life in outback Queensland, add up to Olive's memory. And because Olive, in her later years, succumbs to advanced dementia, the book feels as though it is a tribute, a record, and a testament to the fact that memory fails. It is, heartbreakingly, a long goodbye.

P.J. Parker is a wonderful storyteller. Like memory, the narrative is not linear, and yet it moves at a cracking pace. There are stories within stories, ranging in tone, full of suspense and pathos. This makes it a particularly good class text, as it allows for the study of short story narrative structure.

Wonderful too, is P.J. Parker's language use. Brilliant dialogue and characterization, lyrical language, sentences that have the rhythm of song – this memoir is a delight to read, despite its sad central questions.

Is Fred right to take Olive's life? Who are we when we have lost our memories? Do we have the right to choose the time and method of our death? How do we ensure that the decision to die is never made on economic grounds? How do we make sense of life when it ends in death?

P.J. Parker's memoir explores these questions with great depth and insight, but ultimately what remains with the reader is not just Olive's death, but her life – the café she worked so hard to make successful, the family she loved, the resilience that she passed on to her children.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P.J. Parker was born and raised in the once famous gold-mining town of Charters Towers in rural Queensland, Australia. She was educated locally before attending James Cook University in Townsville and later Queensland University in Brisbane where she studied to become a teacher. P.J. has taught at schools throughout Northern Queensland. Having recently retired from a farm in Tenterfield where she and her husband, Greg, raised cattle and trained horses P.J. now lives in Caloundra where she devotes her time to writing. P.J. has been awarded Runner Up in the 2015 Olga Masters Short Story Award and was published in the Australian earlier this year.

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## THEMES

- Euthanasia/ Treatment of the elderly
- Memory/Dementia
- Death
- Grief/loss
- Religion/faith
- Gender
- Love
- Landscape
- Ritual/Celebration
- Resilience

## STRUCTURE AND WRITING STYLE

P.J. Parker's memoir is an incredible piece of writing. The language is poetical. The narrative pace is fast. The form mirrors the themes and content. She has created a narrative structure that immerses the reader in the past, whilst pushing them forward to the terrifying future that waits.

### Memoir

The Long Goodbye is a memoir, a record of events written by a person having intimate knowledge of them and based on personal observation. It does not tell the author's entire life story, as does an autobiography. Rather, a memoir focuses on a particular event, or particular arc in the life of the writer.

- As a class, discuss some reasons why memoir is such a popular genre. Discuss also why P.J. Parker's memoir has universal appeal, despite it being about a family that is not widely known.
- Does memoir share any conventions with fiction? If so, what are they?
- As a class, discuss some of the problems that could arise for the memoir writer. (Consider the importance of accuracy, privacy and momentum).

### Prologue and Epilogue

A prologue is a separate introductory section of a novel, play, poem or musical.

- Re-read the prologue of A Long Goodbye.
- Why might P.J. Parker have chosen to start with this phone call?
- What themes are set up in The Long Goodbye's prologue?
- How does the prologue create suspense?

An epilogue is a section or speech at the end of a novel, play, poem or musical that acts as a conclusion to what has happened.

- Re-read the epilogue of The Long Goodbye
- How is the mood of the epilogue different from the prologue?
- What do you think P.J. Parker means by 'Those who believe'?

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## Chapter Structure

P.J. Parker's memoir is divided into seventeen chapters, all with a strong central idea that is clearly signaled by its title. This strong central idea allows P.J. Parker to present the events within chapters in a non-linear style. The reader is taken backwards and forwards through time.

'The memories dissipate, coalesce once more into the present smell of gidgee burning', P.J. Parker writes, and in many ways, the memoir imitates memory – the shifting nature of it, the way it surfaces and disappears. The structure of the memoir also mirrors Olive's scrapbook, which is the representation of Olive's memory throughout the work.

## Stories within Stories

P.J. Parker's memoir is divided into sections under dated headings. These sections form part of the greater story being told. They foreshadow important events, for example. However, most sections also function as stand-alone narratives.

Reread the section '1968' on page 16.

- P.J. Parker plunges the reader quickly into setting. How?
- Pamela's treatment of the flies hints at what she will learn in this short story. It also foreshadows the terrible question she will have to deal with when her mother develops dementia. Why are the flies important?
- How does P.J. Parker build to the narrative climax? How does she create suspense through her syntax?
- As a class, discuss Fred's actions. What's your opinion of Fred?

## Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing in a novel is a narrative device where the writer hints at what is to come. For example, the broken doll that Olive received for Christmas one year is a hint for the reader about Olive's fate.

'May Chapman grabbed the parcel and quickly held it against her chest, but Olive had caught a glimpse of a little porcelain foot poking from a tattered hole in the paper – a little porcelain foot with broken toes.' (p.25)

P.J. Parker also uses animals as one way to foreshadow the complicated questions that will arise at the end of the novel. For example, the flies, Fred's pony and Snowflake.

## WRITING STYLE

A writer's style is a combination of many elements. Word choice, sentence length, sentence rhythm and point-of-view are just some of these! P.J. Parker has a distinctive and incredibly affecting style. Her memoir reads like poetry. Her images are wonderfully original. Her sentences are a mixture of lengths, the variation used to create suspense, longing, anger and fear.

## Word Choice

P.J. Parker chooses her words very carefully. Her verbs are strong. Her images are original. The reader sees the Australian landscape clearly. She describes people particularly well. The reader is shown people and events, rather than told about them.

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## Sentence Rhythm

P.J. Parker's sentences have a wonderful rhythm. They are lyrical – songlike – at times. At times they are staccato – one-word sentences used to create suspense.

## Point-of-view

P.J. Parker's memoir is written in the first person. However, she uses a scrapbook approach to present her mother's voice, letters to present her father's voice, and newspaper articles to convey facts and the mood of the time.

Read the description of the bush on page 20 -

'Beyond the window, moon glow ignites willow leaves and runs quicksilver through the branches. The air is almost still now; there's just enough movement to suggest the subtle night perfumes of red gum and ash... the drum of hoof beats...the smell of wood smoke...the black and bitter taste of sweetened billy tea...'

- Why might P.J. Parker have chosen to use the verb 'ignite'? What image does it create? What is the effect of using the verb 'run'?
- What are 'the subtle night perfumes'? What is the effect of using the word 'perfumes'? How do we feel about the bush as a result?

Read Chapter 7 'It never rains but it pours'.

- P.J. Parker often uses strong, short sentences to set up time and place. How does she create suspense in her first four words?

'Granny's bra is as big as my head; when she takes her bra off her big titties hang down her belly. Granny's like a sumo; her belly's big enough a fully cooked baby could fit in there. Granny soaps up in our dirty water, picks up her titties one at a time to wash under them, and I'm thinking, Why do old people let themselves get like that?' (p.108)

- How would you describe the tone of this paragraph?
- How has P.J. Parker made her writing vivid? (Look at repetition, simile, adjectives, strong verbs, sentence length and rhythm, comparison and assonance.)
- How is this paragraph important in terms of the themes of the memoir?

Re read page 105, paying particular attention to the cows.

- How does P. J. Parker use repetition and rhythm to convey the movement of the cows?

P.J. Parker uses dialogue to great effect in this chapter.

- How does P.J. Parker convey the sound of the character's voice? Give an example.

P.J. Parker starts writing in the first person (I, me, my), but at times she shifts into the second person (you).

- Why might she have done this?
- What other forms of writing are used in this chapter? (For example, newspaper reports scrapbooks...) How do these forms add impact to the chapter?

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P.J. Parker is very good at showing us her characters with quick, accurate sketches.

- Note one example of this in the account.
- Sometimes, she shows us something about a character by contrasting them with another. How does she contrast herself with Jan on page 105?

P.J. Parker's word choice is playful at times, and always evocative and vivid.

- 'We're all parched, tonguing for a drink.' (p.107) What's unusual about this sentence?
- What sounds do we hear in this chapter?
- How does P.J. Parker use the length of her sentences to convey the feel of the flood?

## KEY THEMES, MOTIFS AND STUDY TOPICS

### Euthanasia/Treatment of the elderly and sick

Should euthanasia be legalised? Do we have the right to decide how we die? Does a husband have the right to decide this for his wife? Is life of value when we have lost our memories? Is this a question that should be separate from religion?

Throughout the memoir, P.J. Parker shows the reader how her views have changed on these questions. As a child, her opinions of her grandmother were simplistic and harsh. She describes her grandma's bathing ritual on page 108 without sympathy. In fact, the young Pamela has more sympathy for animals than she does for older people. This attitude changes as the memoir progresses, and we see her care for her mother. She begins to like old people, and feel deep sympathy for them.

### Quotes

'He wants to have me put down like a dog.' (p.247)

'Why do old people let themselves get like that?' (p.108)

'I am pro-euthanasia. The only thing I find 'distasteful' or 'disturbing' in the debate is that the inevitable legalisation of 'the right to die' will be motivated by economics not compassion.' (p.211)

'We learned at Sunday school it's wrong to kill God's creatures.' (p.4)

'I hate my dad to infinity on the day he murders Puss-in-Boots. You, my child, will hate your dad to hell and back on the day he kills your mum...' (p.18)

'Thou shalt not put to death that which is not already dying.' (p.228)

'Why don't we let them die?' How many endless nights of bedsores bandages and night terrors before a nurse asks, "Why can't we help them die?" (p.199)

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## Memory

Memory is a central theme of this memoir. Fred Bagnall feels that his wife's quality of life is over because she cannot remember. Pamela is desperate to keep her mother alive despite the dementia. The entire structure of the book mirrors the importance of memory, serving as a scrapbook to retain the important events of Olive and Fred's life.

## Quotes

'I'm leaving tomorrow, but my mum won't know I'm gone. It's hard, watching someone you love die by slow increments.' (p.229)

'May knew the clamouring world and her place in it too well to harbour illusions: she was an old woman now but sometimes, just sometimes, she was still the little goat girl from Begorra Waterhole.' (p.141)

'This is Mum. This is part of her life's journey.' (p.225)

## Death

Death is a powerful theme in the memoir. The events raise questions about the meaning of life, the respectful treatment of bodies (animal and human), about how life continues after loss. Interesting too, are Pamela's discussions with Death. She imagines him as a joker, a philosopher. There are references to life's entrances and exits, presenting life as a theatre, which implies that people have no control over the script of their lives. The references to God not taking calls are also examples of how death makes people feel helpless.

The members of Pamela's family react differently to death. Granny Chapman is grimly determined for much of the novel; however, on the night of the flood, calls to Dick Chapman, her dead husband, for help. Olive carries with her a piece of her father's bone. Fred appears pragmatic about death, fighting for the right to choose the time and method of his and Olive's deaths. Robyn wants to be young, pretty, in the face of death. Pamela refers to herself as the baby, and is devastated during her mother's illness; however, she shows great strength.

## Quotes

'If you ask, 'What is the meaning of it all? you will feel meaningless.' (p.230)

'I'm sorry, God's not taking calls today.' (p.230)

'Too much change: world she knew and loved was dying.' (p.140)

'But if the purpose of life is to matter, to count, to stand for something, to have it make a difference that we ever lived at all?' (p.141)



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## Grief

The theme of grief is introduced early in the novel and explored throughout, building to the climax of Olive's complicated death. In the Author's Note and the Prologue, P.J. Parker introduces the reader to the sadness she feels over the death of her mother, drawing the reader's attention to the idea that grief for a parent is intense, regardless of their age at the time of death. This theme is underlined by the structure of the novel. The time line of the memoir, whilst clearly marked, feels fluid. On one page the reader is with Olive in 2013, on the next the author immerses the reader in the past. Grief, like the memoir, follows its own timeline.

## Quotes

'But it doesn't matter how old they are – how old you are – it is the parent of your youth and childhood memories lying in that casket; a curtain is being closed on more than one lifetime of hopes and dreams and love.' (ix)

'I have slipped between heartbeats and into a silence and a stillness inexpressible.' (ixx)

'It's hard, lying with your mum in the same bed your mum's going to die in.' (p.229)

'Sadness and grief are universal, but how we show these emotions – or hold them back for private moments – is learned.' (p.156)

'I want to be a pretty corpse.' (p.155)

'I'm not only grieving for my mother; I'm grieving for a way of life that's gone under the hammer: Sold! to the highest bidder.' (p.166)

## Love

The memoir explores the love that exists within families, exploring the different bonds – parent and child, grandparent and child, husband and wife, sisters and cousins. The memoir also explores love of the past, love of animals and love of place.

One reason why P.J. Parker's memoir is so powerful is that it presents love as complicated. The questions that haunt the book – did Fred help Olive to die out of love? Was he right to kill her? – are incredibly important, but without definite answers.

## Quotes

The way Pamela cares for her mother after she is ill, is a strong demonstration of her love. 'Don't stand up yet, Mum. We have to wipe first.' (p.171)

'I love you both very much, but you'll grow up one day, and when you're a big girl you'll go away and have children of your own, but Daddy and me will always be together.' (p.22)

There is a strong love of landscape shown through the descriptions in the novel. 'Wading through the pink and purple waterlilies, Olive ran the shadows, splashing silver water in her wake.' (p.22)

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'Robyn has a husband who would die for her – with her, if not for their two daughters: Deborah May and Mia Elizabeth...' (p.156)

'On this day, 17th of March, 1944, was the first day I became really happy, it was a long time ago. I have been happy ever since. It was my very first kiss and Fred's first slap in the face.' (p.241)

## Anger

Pamela's rage at her father is palpable in the memoir. At times, she is angry with her mother and sisters, too, but this feels as though it's a natural part of growing up. Throughout the novel, Pamela directs her anger at life, death, objects, and herself. The epilogue, that returns us to Olive's humour in the phrase, 'Up ya bum!' leaves the reader with the feeling that anger does not win out over love, though.

## Quotes

'I hate my dad to infinity on the day he murders Puss-in-Boots. You, my child, will hate your dad to hell and back on the day he kills your mum...' (p. 18)

'I pretty much let Mum and Betty know I hate 'em. I'm not game to let Dad know I hate him – but I think Dad knows anyway.' (p.127)

## Resilience/Bravery/determination

The Chapman family and the Bagnall family face many challenges on the land, and in their lives: death, grief, natural disaster, war. Olive, as a result of her upbringing on the land, won't take no for an answer from the bank managers and makes a huge success out of her café lease. Granny Chapman saves her family during a flood. Pamela cares for her mother with great love during her illness. Fred provides for his family with things he's found and reused. Robyn faces her illness and death with humour and strength.

## Quotes

'Olive had never seen May cry. Her mum didn't even cry at the funeral.' (p.117)

'Mum showed those two bank managers wouldn't loan her for the café lease- and the one who did: the loan approved by the Commonwealth Bank late in December '64 was paid in full by Christmas '65.' (p.14)

## Landscape

The landscape in The Long Goodbye, both natural and manmade, has a huge impact on the members of Pamela's family. The Australian landscape is presented as beautiful and dangerous. People are shaped into 'bushies' and 'townies'. 'Bushies', whilst not without sympathy or fear, are presented as pragmatic and tough. They must deal with snakes, face floods and accept that animals cannot always be saved. Pamela lives between these two definitions. She's a 'townie' who must come to terms with life in the bush.

When studying how landscape shapes people, look at the way that Bobby is institutionalised (p. 187), the way that Eventide affects Olive and Fred, the way the land shapes Granny Chapman, the way the classroom shapes students like Sam, even the way 'cowboys' are influenced right down to their boots.

## Quotes

'There are two types of people in the world: bushies and townies.'



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'...three young men come to the curtain. Cowboy hats in hand, their belts sport big shiny buckles with bucking bulls and broncos, and their boots are carved with wild mustangs too.' (p. 2)

'And Granny's really mean – got a mouth turned down at both ends, and eyes in the back of her head.' (p.37)

'...you're old enough to know that these things happen in the bush'. (p. 62)

## Celebration/Ritual

Celebrations of events like Christmas are shown to be hugely important– they bring people together, create memories and provide joy. The rituals after death, too, are shown to be important. Pamela weeps after she learns Snowflake isn't to be cared for after death, she writes the eulogy for her mother, she finishes the memoir by recording that there was a plaque commemorating Olive.

Examples of ritual and celebration in the novel include Christmas at Granny Chapman's station, the rituals of cleaning the café, the way the family comes together to say goodbye to Robyn, Olive's funeral, the laying of plaques.

## Gender Roles

Despite the strong women in the memoir, girls are treated differently to boys in terms of education, chores, and even food. When Pamela goes to school with the boys, it is announced that the teacher does not like girls. It's not 'natural' for girls to be educated with boys. Granny Chapman sees laundry as women's work. Boys and girls are given different toys and chores.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Pamela writes in a letter to the editor - 'I am pro-euthanasia. The only thing I find 'distasteful' or 'disturbing' in the debate is that the inevitable legalisation of 'the right to die' will be motivated by economics not compassion.' (p.211)

- In this letter Pamela says she is pro-euthanasia but throughout the memoir she struggles with her Father's decision to take her mother's life. Why do you think this is?
- How does Pamela's attitude to death differ from her father's attitude? Give reasons for the difference.
- As a class, list both sides of the argument.
- Now, decide what you believe. Give reasons for your answer.

'My mother was only sixteen when they met; Dad was twenty-six. Karmic predestination? Or is 'love at first sight' just another lie we tell ourselves in order to make sense of a random world?' (p.123)

- Do you believe in 'love at first sight'?
- Do you believe that Fred acted out of love for Olive? Why or why not?

How are animals used in the memoir? In what ways do they contribute to the themes?

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Treatment of the elderly is an incredibly important issue for a society. Pamela considers this question so carefully because it has become personal for her.

- How do you imagine living when you're old? What would be the perfect arrangement for you?
- Is a person still themselves if they have lost their memories?
- What might be some of the implications for society if we begin to treat the elderly with disrespect?
- How might economics, as Pamela writes, become a motivation for the government to legalise euthanasia?

In the book there are several instances of bullying at school. When Pamela was at school she was bullied about achieving good grades. Samson Kelly or 'Delilah' was also badly bullied at school, and later in life Pamela regrets not standing up for him (p. 86-90).

- What do you think constitutes bullying? Is it just physical and verbal, or can other actions (e.g. body language) cause someone to feel ostracised?
- When Pamela thinks about how she should have stuck up for Samson she says 'doing nothing feels ugly, no matter what your age' (p.90). Discuss this statement and then think about different ways you can help people who are being bullied.
- What can teachers do about bullying?

The book highlights many of the differences between everyday life in Australia today compared with everyday life when Pamela and her parents were growing up. Discuss the difference between Australia's affluence today compared to the conditions of Fred's and Pamela's youth. Use these quotes as a starting point for discussion:

- Our house hasn't got a back door. The Americans didn't leave any doors lying around at Breddon...(p.12)
- Our chairs didn't come from the dump because Dad picked them up for two bob at an auction sale.. (p.13)
- That's a good bike, that is!' I heard Dad tell Mum when he came home from the dump. 'A coat of paint, it'll be as good as new.' (p.26)
- George's Christmas presents for his family: 'Good as any store-bought broom that is...' (p.28)

The book also highlights the changing gender roles in Australian society over the course of Pamela's life. Use the following quotes to discuss the particular hardships faced by women and men due to the gender roles that existed when Pamela was a child. Have these challenges changed today? If so, in what ways have they changed and why?

- Granny Chapman: 'Men don't do washin'-up!' (p.92)
- Other kids think I'm a girl when I go into town with Granny... (p.99)
- 'It takes a lot of courage for a boy to walk across a hall to ask a girl to dance...' (p.131)
- ... no boys to see me gettin' mashed by Bullseye – only Fairy does Home Ec, and he doesn't count. (p.137)
- Good girls don't fight (p.137)

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## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

### Indigenous Australians

The Long Goodbye spans three generations – from the 1930s to the present day. As a result, there are references to Australia's treatment of its indigenous people, and also references to indigenous people in other parts of the world. The land, so important to the family in the memoir, is integral to Indigenous Australians.

- Create a map and mark the main locations that appear in the memoir.
- Mark the important events that occur in the memoir
- Here you will find The AIATSIS Map of Aboriginal Australia that 'attempts to represent all of the language or tribal nation groups of Indigenous people of Australia'.
- Mark on your map the relevant locations of language or tribal nation groups.
- Language can empower and disempower people. P.J. Parker explores how language is used, at times, to disempower women. In her memoir there is evidence of how language is used to disempower Indigenous Australians, too. As a class, discuss these examples.
- Discuss too how language in the current day still works to disempower certain groups.

### Writing Activities

Olive Chapman kept a scrapbook, which functioned as a diary. P.J. Parker's memoir is, in some ways, organised as a scrapbook. Create your own scrapbook and use it to record a month in your life. You could create an online scrapbook, or a physical one like Olive Chapman's. Use a mix of mediums (objects, photographs, poetry, prose).

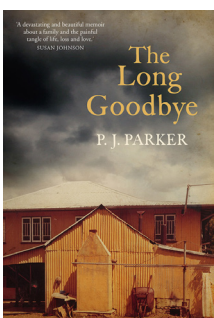
P.J. Parker uses her memory to write a powerful story. Choose a place and write a descriptive piece showing how this place has shaped you. Use some of the techniques employed by the writer to evoke character and setting.

Write a letter to the editor persuading your reader to either legalise or denounce euthanasia, depending on your own views.

### Drama

Hold a Q&A session about the treatment of the elderly in Australian society. Ensure there are a range of viewpoints on the panel, and a range of questions in the audience. The aim is to present and question the range of ethical and moral questions related to care of the elderly.

Alternatively you could hold a formal classroom debate on the topic of euthanasia.



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