



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

TEXT prose

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An open letter to Jay Swan

Jay Swan is the Indigenous detective in the acclaimed Australian film and TV series Mystery Road. This piece is written as an intervention into the work of the writers' room as it develops the script for the program's third season.

Dear Jay [1]

May I call you by that name, even though you are many people? May I give you agency in your own creation, in the composite of writers, actor, cinematographers, directors, editors and producers that have crafted you, shaped you over time through many outings? Would it be presumptuous to claim that I know you well, intimately even? Indeed, I have followed you closely since you emerged, already fully-formed, after what was, on all accounts, a long gestation. For it is you, your character, that concern me. The well-worn tracks you have trodden, the paths you have forged through uncharted territory, and the paths not taken. How you started out as a new detective, green but driven, battling through hostile territory in a white police force full of rot. How you've got tougher, the clench of your jaw set more tightly as you follow the never-ending trail of drugs, corruption and police duplicity. How you keep squandering every opportunity to pick up the pieces of your broken life.

From the beginning you were up against it, pitting the force of your will against men who have more power, more guns, more allies, more recognition. You have hardened, Jay, seasoned into a force to be reckoned with, a man of steel, more sure in your authority, the set of your jaw ever grimmer. That much is a familiar story. It's the standard stock in trade of a detective like you brought in to investigate a homicide deeply embedded in the corruption, complicity and compromise that wrap their tentacles around crooked cops and drug cartels. There is the mystery and thrill of the chase here, the clues, the risk, the showdowns that follow you from town to town, all the battles that pitch the force of one man against another, against the many, and plant your roots deeply in the soil of genre. These roots make you a safe bet, an anchor to hold onto when, as an Indigenous detective, you take us into territory that for some audiences is unexplored. You are our guide, a stable and known presence leading us into worlds riven with struggles over family, culture, gender and power that enmesh the Indigenous communities in the regional towns you're called to.

There is much that could be said, Jay, about the fight for justice that you make your own. At first what drove you was the death of a young black girl and it was the quest for justice that drew you inextricably into the ruthless underworld of meth labs and racketeering cops. Now your focus has shifted. What drives you now is the quest to find the kingpins of the drug cartel and eliminate them. But this fight is not my concern here. It is you that concern me, what has happened to you. You've changed.

You were always taciturn, a man of few words, always more articulate with your eyes, your face, but when you started out you let us see more layers of yourself. You were there for us as a person with many sides, multifaceted. You were more flexible too. You could draw on different parts of yourself to find your way between the layers of the community to seek out connection and information, and that was part of what drew me to you. Sure, you started out in your own home town, and you knew the protocols, how to talk to people – you were sensitive to the grief of the dead girl's mother because you felt that loss, you knew how to engage your conspiratorial old uncle in friendly gossip because you already knew his measure and could meet him on his terms, you knew the give-and-take of getting information from the kids, knew how to find the local girls who might talk, you knew the town, the families and how to behave in that world. That was your home town, but even in *Goldstone*, far from home, you knew how to listen to old Jimmy, to learn what he had to teach you, and not just to speak. But now you're on the outside, in new territory where local knowledge can't get you an entrée. Those soft edges – the

way you were able to mould your approach to match the situations you meet – have become rigid. Now you charge into encounters with people full of bluster and rage, pushing into the world all guns blazing, all force, no yield, and we don't see that rawness any more. You've hidden away that sensitivity, that understanding of social protocols that was a bridge between you and the community, and, dare I say it, between you and us. Have you finally 'gone rogue' as Senior Constable Muller says? [2]

As you move closer to your goal, more forcefully, the complex person we came to know in your moments alone, when you let down the mask and were left face-to-face with all the things that you can't control, all your insecurity, loneliness and failure – has gone underground. Still we read your face and body language but your face gives us less – the same desperation, the same anger, but the pain well hidden, suppressed under the ruthless, relentlessly focused, well-oiled, work-addicted detective. But the tougher your outside gets, the more unmanageable the inside. Yes, I know that is part of your drama, the scars that never heal, the words that can never be fully articulated. But that is also what keeps you re-grooving the same path of self-destruction, missing every chance to grow as a person.

You have found your power and you know how to use it. I feel hesitant to say this, because I know you are a role model and I can see the struggle you've been through to get to this place, but you can't stop there. Is it your destiny to be entrapped by genre? By the rule that says a detective is married to the job, can't allow themselves to feel anything or the enormity of what they have seen will flood in. But you have always been a rule breaker. You can't let yourself be locked in by the precedents set by other detectives.

For some, for sure, recognising your familiar role as a tough detective with rare chinks in the armour that show your soft underbelly is a pleasure in itself and I confess to having shared that pleasure. I too have enjoyed meeting you as someone I feel I've met before, albeit in another guise, and loved seeing how you will surprise me, take me to new places, new contexts. As an Indigenous detective, your investigations have drawn you and us into the tangled skeins of complex cultural worlds that are unknown to many of us who are not Indigenous. This is where your genre has served you – always a mix of the old and the new, the familiar forging a pathway into the unexpected. You've given the old platitudes a run for their money, laid bare the whitewash, exposed the complacency and reinvented, single-handed, what the role of a detective can be. I can see that, faced with almost insurmountable odds, you have had to keep going, to be a warrior. But even warriors eventually come home. Where is home for you, Jay? Where is the place that you live with all your

unmanageable feelings, all that loss, all that grief and shame, that longing and the hurt that keeps you coming back but stops you from ever actually going where you need to go?

You could say that the one who knows you best, the one who is in your flesh and sees the world from behind your eyes, is your avatar, Aaron. But how well do you really know yourself, after so many years of running? It's failure you're running from, isn't it? Mary [3]. The family you made with Mary and then abandoned but can't let go of. Mary is the one who really knows you through and through, who can hit you straight where it hurts most. She is the one who gets under your skin, who can fire bullets that pierce you to the core because she aims straight at the soft parts of yourself that you've tried to stitch up, seal over. Your failure as a father to Crystal [4], as a husband. Your abandonment. All the wreckage of your personal life, the ghosts that haunt you, the places that make you feel powerless, where you can't control other people by force and tenacity. Mary will never accept the compromise you've made for yourself – to bury anything that opens you up, to mask hurt with anger, to run riot with your rage.

There are other people confronting you, telling you that you've gone off the rails, like the furious Senior Sergeant Emma James yelling 'You're a fucken idiot' [5]. But it is Mary who really hits home, leaves you hanging your head in shame, with no comeback, when she says, 'You won't let anyone in, Jay. You gave up on us because we got too hard for you. You even gave up on your own daughter.' Very few words are spoken between you and her, and when they are it's usually tit-for-tat barbs – abuse and accusation, derision, judgement and the hurt barely hidden under the surface. Mary tells it like it is: 'You're the big man, the big hero, you saved the day. And we're left with six dead fellas and their six angry families looking at us. You get a pat on the back. Crystal, she gets a punch in the head... You only care about Big Jay Swan.'

But underneath those words are threads that bind you together, never spoken but seething underneath every interaction. Even though there's a suggestion that you've found a new partner, you're reeled back in with Mary over and over. She follows you, you follow her. I can see that this raw wound you keep scraping keeps the two of you bound. And that ferocious ambivalence is a potent dramatic force, a scarring that never heals. For yours must be one of the most unveiled and corrosive relationships to hit the screen. It's not that I want a soap opera – to get you back together – but I want you to take on your ghosts, to grow. You are still in there but you won't go there.

Mary has grown, cleaned up her act, started a new life, but where is your character arc, Jay? You are stuck in the Faustian deal you've inherited from your generic roots, the one that says you have to sacrifice yourself in the interests of justice and law. But that is changing and you are so much more than that. In *Goldstone*, you took us with you into a world – the world of your ancestors – that has the power to leave you overwhelmed with reverence and emotion, to break you free from the shackles of that old genre stuff and reveal you as a searcher and not just a fighter.

Genre is a hook but your heritage is much bigger than what your genre gives you. You have many more stories than that to tell. And that is your appeal – you are a bearer of complex, deep and powerful stories that are laden with significance for our contemporary world. And I want you to stay on track, to come back to us as a nuanced, layered and empowered character who can carry these stories freighted with unruly fractures, twisted strands of land, history and culture, gender and violence, oppression, resistance and collaboration – the whole messy business of destruction and survival that riddles the colonial enterprise from its inception right through to its ongoing encroachments.

Jay, the answer is there staring you in the face. It's all about your women: Mary and your daughter Crystal. It's with your women that your future lies, the only future that can release you from this path of self-annihilation. It's time to face the hard stuff.

Notes

[1] Jay Swan, is the Indigenous detective and lead character played by Aaron Pedersen in the 2013 film, *Mystery Road*, directed by Ivan Sen, its spin-off, *Goldstone* (2015), also directed by Sen, and the two *Mystery Road* TV series, directed by Rachel Perkins (2019) and Warwick Thornton and Wayne Blair (2020). Both films and television series were produced by Bunya Productions. The television series were broadcast on ABC TV.

[2] Sergeant Muller is played by Anthony Hayes in series 1.

[3] Mary is played by Tasma Walton in the film and TV series.

[4] Crystal is played by Madeleine Madden in both series.

[5] Emma James is played by Judy Davis in series 1.

Anne Rutherford is an Associate Professor in Cinema Studies at Western Sydney University. Her publications include 'Walking the Edge: Performance, the Cinematic Body and the Cultural Mediator in Ivan Sen's Mystery Road' (Studies in Australasian Cinema 9, 3 2015) and 'Ivan Sen's Cinematic Imaginary: Restraint, Complexity and a Politics of Place' (in A Companion to Australian Cinema, Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).