# *Bad hair days* and the good of Pamela Bone's literary journalism

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**Abstract**

*As a recipient of the United Nations media peace prize, Pamela Bone was noted for her fearless reporting on humanitarian, gender and social justice issues. While some of her columns invited controversy, "even when people disagreed with her, they respected and understood what she wrote came from her heart and mind and her great moral clarity" (Gawenda, quoted in Chandler, 2008, n.p.). Retiring from* The Age *newspaper at the end of 2005, Bone accepted an invitation from Melbourne University Press to write a memoir about her cancer experience. Her reluctance to write confessional columns was finally converted into a candid account of her terminal prognosis, using the form of literary journalism. This paper explores the therapeutic value of Bone's* Bad hair days*, and the wider contribution of her autobiographical voicing of illness.*

## 'The trip would be wasted'

It may seem surprising that highly respected *Age* journalist Pamela Bone did not initially write about her cancer diagnosis and treatment, given that the personal often informed her opinion columns for the newspaper.

Feeling ill on a humanitarian assignment to Chad in September 2004, she deduced she might have picked up a disease such as malaria while travelling in developing countries. Upon arriving home from the airport she slept for the morning, then went to her workplace so she could "write the story, because without the story in the paper the trip would be wasted" (Bone, 2007a, p. 19). After filing the story, she left the office that night not knowing it was for the last time. As she later wrote:

> The last time, after twenty-two years in that familiar, untidy third floor of that ugly brown brick building on the corner of Spencer and Lonsdale streets. How many times had I sat in some editorial conference, looking through the window to the West Gate Bridge, wishing I were on it, on the way to the Great Ocean Road, or somewhere else instead of at work. The last time walking down the corridor with the shelves piled high with newspapers, past the desks where sub-editors had heads down working on the late edition, out into the bleak cold end of Lonsdale Street, with that toxic, asbestos-filled tower opposite. (Bone, 2007a, pp. 19-20)

Subsequently, Bone was hospitalised and diagnosed with multiple myeloma – a disease that is treatable, but not curable. After an initial period of chemotherapy, she continued to contribute to *The Age* in late 2004 and 2005. But unbeknown to her devoted readers, she was writing from home and filing pieces remotely as her health permitted. She later indicated why it was important for her to keep writing for the newspaper:

> The process seemed marvellous to me. If only, I thought, all those *Age* readers knew that what they were reading was written by a woman sitting at a little desk in a flat in the suburbs; a woman who, when standing up after sitting in front of the computer screen for a couple of hours, would feel her head spinning like a top, would start to walk then stop and hold on to the nearest object until the faintness passed, and balance herself before setting off again.
>
> I sound as though I'm trying to present myself as soldiering on bravely, but I did this work not to show how brave or conscientious I was, but because I needed to; because writing made me feel normal, almost. (Bone, 2007a, p. 67)

Bone also explained the type of writing she was doing at the time, and partially accounted for the reluctance to tell *The Age* readers what was really happening to her:

> I mainly wrote leaders (the newspaper's editorial opinions) and some columns under my own name. Despite the fact that my column was sometimes quite personal, I did not write about my illness. It didn't at the time seem to me appropriate to tell the readers what I was going through in my personal life: the nausea, the hair loss, the weakness, the feelings I experienced when I was told I had an incurable cancer. (Bone, 2007a, p. xi)

Bone expanded on why the immediacy of her diagnosis and treatment did not form any of her newspaper ruminations:

> In my columns I wrote about war and terrorism, feminism and multiculturalism. I did not, during this time, write about cancer. It didn't seem to me that my illness was relevant to any public debate. Besides, I didn't think I had anything to *say* about cancer. What if I wrote: "I have cancer". Then how did I fill up the rest of the 75 centimetres of column space? (Bone, 2007a, p. 177)

As she later reflected, she did not strategically or politically embargo the topic of her cancer during this period; it was more a case of privileging other topics she thought had greater social currency at the time:

> When I began writing again, after three months of chemotherapy, I wrote letters and columns about anything that was topical: about family-friendly workplaces; about childhood obesity; about the importance of encouraging children to read; about keeping religion out of politics and about Third World poverty. I wrote about everything except the thing that was occupying most of my waking thoughts.
>
> For a year I wrote nothing about my cancer. I'm trying to remember why. I think it just didn't occur to me to. It's true that in my columns I often used an anecdote from my personal life to illustrate a point. Perhaps there was no point I wanted to make that I could relate to having cancer. Besides, I was not looking for sympathy. I did not want to write a column that said: "I think there should be no state funding for religious schools, and by the way I've got cancer, so you shouldn't abuse me." (Bone, 2007a, p.70)

This choice to not share intimate details of her illness with the public stands in direct contrast to several UK journalists who used their newspaper columns to voice their experiences of cancer: most notable of these are John Diamond and Ruth Picardie.

## '… whether I should have written some kind of "cancer diary" '

Sue Joseph notes there has been "[a] resurgence of auto-ethnographic writing in the late twentieth century marketplace …" (Joseph, 2013, n.p.). The proliferation of auto-ethnographic writing documenting first-hand experiences is now especially evident in the narration of illness. Journalists such as Diamond were increasingly comfortable collapsing the traditional distance between themselves and their readers, taking readers into private confidences as they discussed the trauma of diagnosis and the debilitating medical interventions that followed. Some, in a heightened state of mortality, wrote poignant reflections on impending death, admonishing the reader about how they, in their own lives, might live more purposefully and gratefully. These are the performative tropes characteristic of Diamond's work in particular.

In an informative journal article entitled "How to die well: aesthetic and ethical issues in confessional cancer diaries", Rosalind Coward suggests why journalists are drawn to share stories about their illnesses: "They are communicators: why wouldn't they communicate such a significant event?" (Coward, 2014, p. 61). This impulse to undercut the traditionally sanctioned objective and impersonal voice of a journalist reporting in the third person and replace it with an experiential first-person narrative is evidenced by the increasing publication of newspaper articles and memoirs commodifying the private world of the journalist for wider public consumption. Again, Coward outlines some of the causes:

> This proliferation of first person journalism has several interconnected causes including: enthusiasm for a visible human journalistic presence as a counterweight to what is perceived as the disguised viewpoint of journalistic objectivity; the "featurisation" of journalism with its increasing emphasis on intimate and emotional content; and a regard for stories about real life experience and autobiographical first person writing. (Coward, 2014, p. 616)

While there are readers and critics who regard such intimate disclosures of illness as self-indulgence or a form of narcissism, many of these stories have been welcomed and venerated by others for the agency afforded to writers who have been dehumanised by illness and treatment processes. It is frequently argued that through the circulation of stories, a person communicating an illness narrative is able to speak back to and re-assert aspects of their own identity, and assist in destigmatising disease (Charon, 2006; Frank, 2013). In her scholarly work on therapeutic literature, Ann Jurecic considers the ways in which writers and readers use illness narratives to "make meaning of the experiences of living *at risk*, *in prognosis* and *in pain*" (2012, p. 4). While there are ongoing critical debates constellating around such confessions, raising questions about potential victimisation and voyeuristic practices, the focus of this article is on the significance of Bone's work in breaking silence around her cancer experience and the ways in which her journalism has the "power to create community" (Frank, 2013, p. xiii).

When discussing the importance of community building through literary acts in a piece for *The Guardian* entitled "Has confessional gone too far?", Lucy Cavendish posits her case for first-person journalism empowering both the writer and reader:

> I think journalism has moved on so that the inward has become as interesting as the outward – our inner emotional lives, and the fact that we write about them, reflects the genuine breakthrough that has happened in society. The world has moved on to a state where we are all more emotionally open. Real people want real stories that have meaning to them written by people they trust. They don't want journalists to be in their little world looking out, they want journalists to dirty their hands, to delve inwards and make a real connection with the reader. (Roberts & Cavendish, 2012, n.p.)

Even Bone, who demurred at the thought of using her column to write about her illness during the first year of diagnosis and invasive treatment, subsequently reconsidered her choice:

> I've often wondered since whether I should have written some kind of "cancer diary". I know of no journalist in Australia who has, but in Britain there have been several. Opinions have differed about the appropriateness of them. Some commentators found them self-indulgent. But as John Diamond, who as well as writing about his cancer also made a film about it for the BBC, wrote in *The Times*: "This is a personal column: I can't pretend that the event which is currently informing everything I think or do doesn't exist." (Bone, 2007a, p. 70)

As she considered her reluctance to write about cancer, and Diamond's insistence on writing about this topic, Bone was drawn to his overriding question: "Who, given the opportunity and the diagnosis, wouldn't want to write about it?" (Diamond, quoted in Bone, 2007a, p. 71). And her response to his rhetorical question was initially somewhat telling: "Well, for example, me" (Bone, 2007a, p. 71).

However, Diamond justified his decision, and deflected criticism about possible self-indulgent tendencies, by locating and authenticating his personal column as a mode of communicating the real. For Diamond, being a truthful practitioner required a ready and ongoing capacity to reveal the radical disorientation and fear resulting from his progressive disease to his readers: "… There you are: the truth, at last" (Diamond, 1997, n.p). John Tulloch's valuable scholarship on the ethics of first-person narration highlights some of the issues confronting a writer who seeks to authentically mediate first-hand experiences:

> Consciously or unconsciously, the first choice facing any journalist in constructing a narrative is the mode of telling the story and its implications for the practice of truthfulness. The foundation of trust in journalism lies not in the objective truth of its observations but the truthfulness of its practice. Fundamental to this is the construction of an authentic narrative voice, a voice we are disposed to trust. (Tulloch, 2014, p. 630)

The foundational base of Bone's journalism practice while working at *The Age* was conveying her own truth to readers; hers was a voice readers were "disposed to trust". She readily employed the personal to make political points or advocate for humanitarian or social justice issues, but the disinclination to use any reference to her cancer during the initial period of her illness is clearly evident. In commenting on Bone's general preference for a more objective writerly stance, Morag Fraser notes: "Some of us are born autobiographers. Others have autobiography thrust upon them. Pamela Bone is very much of the latter camp, a reluctant self-discloser" (Fraser, 2007, n.p). Bone confirmed this aversion to autobiographical recourse when discussing the nature of her first book, in which she drew on aspects of her own childhood and interviewed several other Australians to structure the chapters: "Although one of the childhoods in this book is mine, *Up we grew* is not an autobiography, which would require me to reveal more about myself – and others – than I want to" (Bone, 2004, p. 3). Sybil Nolan, a former *Age* opinion editor who worked with Bone for a year and had oversight of her column, later worked as commissioning editor for Melbourne University Press, which published Bone's first book, *Up we grew: stories of Australian childhoods*. She remembers:

> During that year looking closely at Pamela's columns and talking to her about them I realised how brave she was but also how determined to be a strong individual voice. I thought then and I still think now that Pamela had a way of making people look at particular aspects of experience with fresh eyes. Once she had decided her stand on an issue she was hard to shift. There was nothing wishy-washy about Pamela. Also, she really could write well for newspapers, and I imagined she would take to writing books with relish. (Nolan, 2015, n.p.)

Having launched *Up we grew* only a few months before becoming ill, Bone did not have the opportunity to widely promote her first non-fiction book. It perhaps did not occur to her at the time

that there might be a market following on from this first contribution for an Australian literary journalism work exploring her cancer experience, so she continued writing newspaper columns.

However, during 2005 Bone became increasingly aware of a growing sense of fatigue and opted to take a redundancy from *The Age* at the end of that year:

> I told myself there's nothing worse than a columnist who keeps on giving opinions long after he or she has run out of anything new to say. I was beginning to feel that way about my own columns. I was sick of the sound of my own voice. I was also weary of the clamour of public debate, the angry letters that invariably appeared on the letters' page the day after a column. If you can't stand the heat you should get out the kitchen. All right, I would. Good bye to all that. (Bone, 2007a, p. 178)

However, for many *Age* devotees, the columnist Pamela Bone was a well-established and familiar name. Accordingly, she felt a duty to her readers to indicate why she was leaving the newspaper, and this became the impetus for sharing the news about her illness directly with them:

> When I knew I was leaving *The Age* I wondered whether I should write a farewell column. It seemed on the one hand self-indulgent, but on the other hand it was abrupt to just disappear; when I had been writing a sometimes personal column for at least fifteen years, and had quite a few regular correspondents. So I did. I told my readers then that I had incurable cancer. It was a very hard column to write. (Bone, 2007a, p. 181)

This final column for *The Age* was Bone's first foray into publicly narrating and circulating her deeply personal and life-altering situation. She shared with the public:

> The world of illness is a different world. Weeks later I stood before the mirror, 13 kilograms lighter, my head completely bald, a plastic tube burrowed into my chest, and saw myself a poor, diminished creature. I used to bustle about. Now I walked slowly, weakly. When I went out into the street I marvelled at how well and strong all the people looked. I felt no longer one of them. (Bone, 2005, n.p.)

However, her final column also exemplified Bone's signature capacity to use the personal as a way to ultimately inform and educate her readers about issues that extend beyond the self:

> Why am I writing about this now? Partly because I couldn't before. But also because there is nothing unusual about my case. Multiple myeloma is fairly rare, but cancer is not. One in four, or even one in three people will get it. There's a whole community of us out there; we can be seen around the place in our headscarves and wigs and beanies, and we recognise each other and give each other sympathetic smiles. (Bone, 2005, n.p.)

She concluded this final column for *The Age* with a confessional mix of the polemical and personal: "I have not set out to be a 'contrarian', as I have been described, but then, to offend no one you will say nothing. I do want to thank all of you who have read, either approvingly or disapprovingly, what I have written over the years. I will miss you" (Bone, 2005, n.p.).

## 'A memoir with *some* cancer'

When reflecting on why writing in a professional context mattered so much to her, Bone provides this valuable insight: "[while] … I was a journalist I still had an identity. It meant I was still someone other than a Sick Woman" (Bone, 2007a, p. 59). However, when retiring from this role at *The Age*, she remained in a position to consider other journalism projects, and, after conversations with Melbourne University Press, she agreed to write a non-fiction book that would involve writing about her experience with multiple myeloma. As commissioning editor at that

time, Sybil Nolan – when responding to recent interview questions on the process and value of Bone's memoir – observes:

> This was Pamela's second book, and the topic almost selected itself. It was a possibility she and I sometimes touched on in conversation but she didn't want to go down that path. Her life, including her writer's life, had been hijacked by her illness in the most unforeseen way. Being the sort of journalist and writer that she was, inevitably after she had passed through the deeply challenging first phase of her illness she began to think about writing the book. (Nolan, 2015, n.p)

While Bone was now comfortably working with long-form literary journalism, she ultimately resisted the insularity of confining the content of *Bad hair days* to confessions about illness:

> ... when I began writing this book I was only writing about cancer, rather than the many other things that have consumed my thinking: war, terrorism, tsunamis, religion, poverty, human rights abuses. It occurred to me there was something false about what I was trying to do. So I returned to the beginning and rewrote the story as I experienced it. (Bone, 2007a, p. xii)

It was important for her to maintain the wider purview that had come to distinguish her journalistic life, and in an interview with ABC radio presenter Lindy Burns on the Melbourne Drive program she described *Bad hair days* as "a memoir with *some* cancer" (Bone, 2007c, emphasis added). Bone did not want cancer to define the entirety of her literary conversation with the public. Nolan contextualises the vision and scope of the memoir in greater detail:

> The book was never intended to be a "poor me" sort of book. Illness memoir is a very negative term – most successful illness memoirs are a great deal more than that. Pamela was very inspired by the late British journalist John Diamond's memoir of his cancer journey. Her book was about the illness journey – the shock of diagnosis, the treatment, the outcomes etc. – but it was also about trying to get on and live your life – which for Pamela meant continuing her involvement in thinking, writing and public speaking, as well as spending time with her family, who were very important in her life. And it's also about how your life changes completely when you don't know if you will survive or die from your illness. The title of the book shocked some people who thought it was in poor taste, but Pamela suggested the title herself and clung to it. Having decided to do the book she really wanted to engage readers. The book is a very Pamela-esque mixture of the personal and the political. (Nolan, 2015, n.p)

While Bone's literary journalism contribution can be read as an amalgam of "the personal and political", some of the most moving and confronting passages in the memoir remain her first-hand accounts of the early days of her illness. In a chapter entitled "Not being brave", she candidly wrote:

> Some days I would drag myself out of bed and into the shower only to stagger back to bed, wet and wrapped in a towel. I would lean out of the bed to vomit into a dish. When I did get up I was weak, shaky and often dizzy. Often, when walking even a short distance I would have to stop and hold onto something so I wouldn't fall over. I was abominably tired, and nauseated, despite the anti-emetic tablets I was given. I had cracks in my lips and my nose. My gums bled, my nose bled, my bottom bled; my skin was dry and itchy. I had a foul metallic taste in my mouth. (Bone, 2007a, p. 38)

And though openly representing her abject and vulnerable state, she also wanted her readers to encounter a heartfelt tribute to her husband and the familial bonds sustaining her:

> And Jürgen, like a rock. "We'll beat this", he said. He sat by me while I slept, held the back of my neck while I vomited, wiped the diarrhoea from my legs, scoffed at my dying. This is what you know: that you love your family and they love you. (Bone, 2007a, p. 27)

While acknowledging the importance of loving relationships, she continued to write frankly on the psychological impact of her disease: "I would lie on the bed in the daytime and say to myself, I want to die, I want to die, but I don't know how you do it. It seemed a strange and unfair thing, that you couldn't die when you wanted to" (Bone, 2007a, p. 42). Her willingness to share her fear and confusion as she confronted death highlights the extent of what she was, ultimately, prepared to reveal:

> Dying is only oblivion, I told myself. It's like it was before you were born; or, if you think there is any consciousness in the womb, before you were conceived. It's nothingness. How can you be afraid of not-being, since when you are not-being you won't even know since you are not-being?
>
> What was I frightened of then? I was full of unfocussed fear. I would sit in the chair at night, afraid to get up and go to bed. In the morning I would lie in bed, afraid to get up. I sat in the chair each morning reading *The Age*, making it last, afraid to come to the end of it. Because when I came to the end of it I would have to find something else to read, and that was frightening. Or I stood at the window, forcing myself to take long, deep breaths. (Bone, 2007a, p. 44)

The previously assured and controlled voice of the newspaper columnist gave way to a vulnerable and fearful narrator whose life had been radically altered by disease:

> In the face of cancer, I lost my contentment, and I lost my courage. To be brave is important to me. It's what matters, I've always thought. Whatever else I haven't got, I've got that. People have always said it about me. I am a brave person … But now I was not brave. I was weak and fearful. And I hated being that. (Bone, 2007a, pp. 52-53)

Interestingly, it was her access to John Diamond's confessional memoir, *C: because cowards get cancer too,* that brought Bone some comfort during this period because "it was written by someone dying of cancer and who was also a journalist" (Bone, 2007a, p. 53). As she read his work a writerly camaraderie was forged, and although Diamond resisted the mantle of bravery and referenced himself as a coward, Bone reaffirmed his important literary influence: "His book made me think about what bravery is" (Bone, 2007a, p. 53).

## 'The world was out of joint and so was I'

While Bone may have originally questioned whether writing about her illness was a *bona fide* activity, it was the work of other non-fiction authors that reassured her of the value of this kind of testimonial work:

> Writers like Philip Roth, Doris Brett and Susan Sontag have legitimised illness as a subject that can be written about. I don't imagine for a moment that I could do as well as they have, but reading their books has made me feel it is all right to write about my own illness. I realise, at this late stage of writing this book, that until now I didn't really feel that the endeavour was legitimate. I have now been given permission. (Bone, 2007a, p. 109)

Thinking through how much these writers helped her, she subsequently reflected on the missed opportunity of writing about illness in earlier newspaper columns:

> In retrospect, I think I might have done readers more of a service by writing about my illness: for the main reason that, with cancer affecting a quarter to a third of all Australians, the likelihood is that there are many *Age* readers going through the same thing, who might have gained a small comfort from reading about someone else suffering the trauma of chemotherapy and facing the prospect of premature death, and to know that they were not alone in what they were going through. It might have been good to have used my column to challenge the taboo this society has about talking about death. (Bone, 2007a, p. 71)

While she never made bold claims that talking about illness and death in *Bad hair days* functioned as some kind of healing process, there are elements of her literary journalism that reflect aspects of therapeutic writing.

In an informative overview in *The writing cure*: *how expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being,* editors Stephen Lepore and Joshua Smyth provide an historical thumb sketch of how "the application of writing for therapeutic ends seems to have emerged from the psychotherapeutic tradition of using expressive therapies to relive ailments associated with traumatic experiences" (Lepore & Smyth, 2002, p. 3). Significantly, the authors maintain "psychotherapies have at their core techniques that promote identification, exploration, and expression of stress-related thoughts and feelings" (Lepore & Smyth, 2002, p. 3). Looking through this therapeutic lens, one finds Bone's memoir expressing thoughts and feelings that caused profound distress:

> Perhaps there is something about cancer that causes this: a feeling of being in some way shamed. Not everyone, but many people with cancer feel this way … Worse than the physical weakness was the fear I had that I was losing my mind. My thoughts were vague … Yes, I thought, this is what I've lost; contentment. I'd lost the feeling that with all I knew was wrong with the world, at the bottom the world was all right. Now the world was not all right. The world was out of joint and so was I. (Bone, 2007a, pp. 49-50)

However, being able to write, to shape meditations and pose arguments during the memoir project, in many ways created a reparative and therapeutic space of realignment as she continued in the familiar role of a journalist deeply considering issues at hand, and offering personal views on them. The continuity of her writerly self did, in some ways, provide a therapeutic offset to aspects of a disintegrating physical self. Bone provided an insight into this sense of diminution: "I have felt ashamed, have felt humiliated, but this was a result of the treatment for the cancer, rather than the cancer itself. It was the chemo that brought me low" (Bone, 2007a, p. 112). Writing her memoir in some ways functioned as a regenerative counterpoint to debilitating medical interventions.

Langelle and Meijers propose that writing functions as a therapeutic and expansive modality when it enables a person to "work toward a more life-giving perspective" which "may include a shift in perspective, acceptance, or meaning found/constructed" (Langelle & Meijers, 2009, p. 59). Throughout the process of writing *Bad hair days*, Bone re-asserted her identity, and in crafting and (re)structuring a sequenced story about her experience with multiple myeloma "telling, and even more so writing" became "a way of taking [some] control, creating order and thus keeping chaos at bay" (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p. 23). In this way, too, writing her memoir functioned as an important therapeutic means of re-orientating and re-anchoring herself in the social order, and storying her illness can be viewed as an essential component in Bone making sense of the radical dislocation caused by a life-threatening disease. As Anatole Broyard suggests, it "may not be dying we fear so much, but the diminished self" (1993, p. 25).

## 'What else I would have done with my life'

Importantly, writing *Bad hair days* provided a vital outlet for Bone to grieve her departure from *The Age* and retirement from a civic role she relished. Thinking back to that afternoon in her office when she had filed the story on Chad, she wrote:

> If I had known it was the last time I would have mourned, because I loved it. Being a journalist at *The Age* was my identity for the greater part of my adult life. When I was much younger becoming a newspaper reporter ("reporter" always sounded sort of racy; "journalist" sounded much more serious and intelligent) was beyond my wildest imaginings. Now I can't imagine what else I would have done with my life. (Bone, 2007a, p. 20)

Working as a "newspaper reporter" and respected journalist was an intrinsic part of her being. Bone's passionate commitment to righting (and writing) injustices gave her newspaper columns purpose. It was this journalistic drive to raise consciousness and consciences that resulted in the international and national recognition of Bone's oeuvre through the United Nations media peace prize and a Walkley award for her outstanding contribution to journalism.

Even after a terminal diagnosis, she continued to seek opportunities for contributing to – and influencing – public discourse on humanitarian issues, politics, human rights, feminism, religion and voluntary euthanasia. As Bone herself confirmed: "I found too, that – apart from the initial period when I was very ill – I didn't stop caring about the things that were happening in the world" (Bone, 2007a, p. xii). Moving from column writing to a literary journalism project enabled her to carry on caring about, and having conversations with, the world beyond her illness.

Essential to Bone was the way in which the memoir project would be framed. She resisted any categorisation that *Bad hair days* should simply be read as a psychosocial and physical account of illness, and wanted her work to be seen as an act of literary enlargement – the eclectic gathering of a personal and professional life in progress. In her own words, the book

> ... is an account of a two-year journey with cancer … It is not an autobiography, though there are elements of that in it. It is not a textbook for cancer sufferers, though there are descriptions of cancer treatments and the various philosophies in treating cancer. It is about cancer, war, journalism, chocolate cake and a few other things. It is not a collection of opinion columns – although there are plenty of opinions in it. This is the problem with having written opinion for so long: it makes one very opinionated. (Bone, 2007a, p. xii)

Significantly, the book also provided a conduit for her to refine and articulate opinions on journalism praxis:

> There is no pleasure in writing, though there may be some pleasure in having written. Sometimes, after my column is published I'll read it in the paper even though I've read it several times before, spent hours fussing with it, moving paragraphs around and taking out and putting back commas, having woken in the middle of the night and thought, no, you can't say that, and gone to work early and changed it. Once it's printed it always looks different. It's given authenticity by being on the page. (Bone, 2007a, p. 22)

Part of Bone's authentication as a writer was not purely related to matters of style; it was equally about substance. The journalistic substance of her work by necessity took Bone beyond the strictures of disease. She explained her writing approach and practice of expanding the memoir in a conversation with Richard Fidler on ABC Radio National:

> And so I would write a bit about the illness and the treatment I was having and then it was sort of almost a relief to, to stop writing about myself and then start writing

> about other things that were happening, in my, you know, in the world, and in my life, so I keep sort of going off at a tangent. (Bone, 2007b)

At the centre of Bone's praxis remained a need to write for more than herself. One of the enduring "tangents" of the memoir is her informed commentary on what she perceived as the current state of journalism. It was the pace and scope of the literary journalism project that provided her with the time (and space) to communicate her prescient observations at length:

> You could not blame anyone for being disgusted at the excesses of the media, the way it panders to people's sense of voyeurism and *schadenfreude,* the catch-them-doing-something-wrong mentality of it all, the destroying of reputations, the hounding of someone who's been caught out making a mistake or saying something silly. This is not a conspiracy, it is competition. But it can be very harmful, in promoting such a degree of cynicism that people lose faith in their institutions and governments. (Bone, 2007a, p. 68)

When Bone was immersed in the daily production of newspaper columns dictated by current news agendas, she would not have had the time to develop such an elegant and considered riposte. As Ricketson points out, because of the speed of meeting tight deadlines, "the nature of journalistic work gives you little time to reflect on what you have just done" (Ricketson, 2012, p. 10). But using the mode of long-form journalism, Bone had an opportunity not only to reflect on her own physical decline, but also to discuss her views on a perceived decline in quality journalism. She claimed:

> Michael Gawenda is rarely given credit for it, but for the seven years of his editorship *The Age* remained an intelligent and responsible broadsheet newspaper. I am not sure it still is. It is on some days. Parts of it are on all days … There are more and bigger pictures, fewer words. (Bone, 2007a, p. 191)

There are other pertinent critiques freely offered:

> Journalism, it has to be said, is responsible for making people think the world is worse than it actually is. Bad news is over-reported. Good news is massively under-reported. Day after day the deadlines tell of crime, corruption, war, terrorism, of man's inhumanity to man. Then you go out into the street and you notice the sun is shining, people are walking their dogs, obeying the law and being civil to each other. (Bone, 2007a, p. 68)

When reflecting on her long career in journalism Bone tells how she first came to Melbourne for a position with *The Age* and was interviewed by Mark Butler, Creighton Burns and Robert Haupt: "I showed them my *Shepparton News* pieces, pasted into a scrapbook with a picture of Mickey Mouse on the cover" and "got the job …" (Bone, 2007a, p. 180). In those days, her pay was so low that, as a single parent supporting a family, she delivered advertising leaflets on the weekend. She recalls how her public profile developed: "Over the years I progressed to higher positions, became a leader writer; was given my own opinion column; was made an associate editor, gave speeches, travelled to international conferences, met important people", but then she concludes with this arresting revelation: "All that time, I kept a secret: I was an imposter" (Bone, 2007a, p. 181). Coming to the profession later in life, Bone believed that if she had been required to formally study journalism, sit an examination and undertake several interviews she would "… never have got in" (Bone, 2007a, p. 181). However, such modesty and her unassuming demeanour, did not diminish the esteem of colleagues and readers who considered her to be "fearless on matters of politics, human rights, justice and religion … and a passionate campaigner on the right to die" (Chandler, 2008, n.p.). The appreciation many readers had for her journalistic contribution can be found in a vignette Bone narrated after a courier came to her door delivering letters responding to her final column in *The Age*:

> When I sat down to read the messages, for the first time in more than a year, tears came. The letters were full of warmth and affection and good wishes: "Dear, clever, spirited, interesting Pamela Bone, retiring in a no-fuss way. And typically not without a plea for some necessary legislation. Look after yourself". (Bone, 2007a, p. 183)

And most emblematic of her deep connection with the public is the correspondence from a reader in a small Victorian country town:

> One such letter said, "I am your friend from Nagambie. Did you know you had a friend in Nagambie?"
>
> I didn't know. Truly. I didn't know that I had so many friends. I was deeply, deeply moved. I sat down to answer some. But there were too many, and my hands were too shaky. I am sorry I couldn't answer them. If you, reading this, happen to be one of the people who wrote to me: thank you, most sincerely, from my heart. (Bone, 2007a, p. 184)

## Coda

While keenly aware of the limits of writing, Bone remained a committed journalism practitioner: "What do I think about it, this pursuit I have been engaged in for thirty years? Is it still the big important thing I thought it was when I began it? Well, yes, I do still believe it is, though being out of the day-to-day business of it makes it easier to see its faults" (Bone, 2007a, p. 68). Even though such observations were published in 2007, Nolan highlights the memoir's continuing value:

> I spoke to someone the other day who had just read it again. They got a lot out of the second part of the book, which is like a long riff by Pamela on what she was worried about in terms of the way the world was going. Her comments are very interesting to look back on. It is a book very much immersed in its troubling times, the first decade of the 21st century. (Nolan, 2015, n.p.)

When contemplating her own contribution as a journalist, and for what she would like to be remembered, Bone wrote: "If anyone should ever consider I'm worthy of an obituary, I hope whoever writes it doesn't say 'she died after a long battle with cancer'" (Bone, 2007a, p. 104). Pleasingly, the obituaries and tributes responding to her death in 2008 focused on her literary and humanitarian achievements. However, a significant part of this literary legacy remains inextricably bound to her candour in writing about the disease that took her life. Hopefully though, she would posthumously accept an accolade for her memoir similar to that she generously afforded John Diamond: "And although he is dead his voice, with its decency and wit, speaks to me from the pages of his book" (Bone, 2007a, p. 54).

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