Beyond the Screenplay: Memoir and Family Relations in Three Films by Gaylene Preston

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Introduction

In 1992, emerging filmmaker Gaylene Preston recounted that as a child she was considered a ‘very famous liar’: ‘I always preferred a story to reality. I am very interested in family stories, and I suppose being a storyteller this end of the twentieth century means you have to deal with the plastic. Stories are lies for good purpose’ (Preston, 1992: 161). Her sentiment exemplifies the dilemmas facing biographical and autobiographical screenwriters in a genre where the task is to choose from whole lives and weave stories that, whilst not necessarily the truth, do represent a truth. For such screenwriters and filmmakers, these dilemmas become even more conflicted when the truths belong to their own families, and when they are secrets. This chapter thus explores aspects of auto/biography and film memoir, and secrets, truth and family in particular, in three works by New Zealand filmmaker Gaylene Preston: War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us (1995), Perfect Strangers (2003) and Home By Christmas (2010).

The last of these, Home By Christmas, is Preston’s account of her father’s experience as a soldier in Italy during World War II based on interviews she conducted with him late in 1991, not long before he died. Described by the filmmaker as a ‘film memoir’, the work blends fact and fiction to recount Ed Preston’s war experiences and his four-year absence from his wife and newly born son. The film’s complex narrative, built from reconstructed interviews, includes interwoven strands of voice-over narration, recollection, historical documentary and dramatisation, ultimately becoming Preston’s own auto/biography of the secrets
held between ‘the before’ and ‘the after’ of World War II for intersecting generations of her family.

*War Stories, Perfect Strangers* and *Home By Christmas* are here read as a trilogy, each film uncovering then building upon these family secrets. In *War Stories*, Preston’s mother is interviewed about her wartime experiences in which she tells of having a romantic affair whilst her husband was away on active military service. Whilst *War Stories* is a documentary and *Home By Christmas* a memoir, *Perfect Strangers* is a fiction film, the story of a woman in a love triangle with two men, one of whom becomes a dead body hidden in a freezer. *Perfect Strangers*’ figurative relationship to *Home By Christmas* provides a fruitful avenue of investigation into the tensions between private and public, and a way of reframing the ordinary and the heroic in the construction of film memoir. As such, it is useful for screenwriters in reflecting on the kaleidoscopic ways in which one story might be told, and ways in which biographical material might be mined for creative interpretation.

**Backstory**

Gaylene Preston’s filmography is extensive, spanning a variety of forms including television and film, drama and documentary. Within these she has written, directed and produced across a number of genres including: fantasy thriller, *Mr. Wrong* (1985); historical biopic, *Bread and Roses* (1993); comedy, *Ruby and Rata* (1990); documentary, *Titleless Wonders* (2001); and artists’ portraits, *Hone Tuwhare* (1996), *Lovely Rita* (2007) and *Kai Purakau: Keri Hulme – Teller of Tales* (1987). The majority of Preston’s works are centred on women, and their stories are imbued with a feminist orthodoxy. Preston began her career in art therapy in New Zealand, then in drama therapy in the UK, returning home after seeing a London screening of *This is New Zealand* (Macdonald, 1970), a promotional tourism film produced for Expo ’70. This anecdotal recollection, ‘Oh, I have to go home. They can make films there!’ (Wiles, 2010) is at the heart of Preston’s screen storytelling and she is one of only a few internationally successful New Zealand filmmakers who remains in production ‘at home’.

As her oeuvre attests, Preston’s feminist sensibility is situated within a strong desire to explore personal issues against a background of New Zealand nationhood and national identity. Furthermore, the screenwriting, development and production in each case are determined by the subject matter, the characters, the nature of their stories and the film’s industrial context. To say that Preston is a screenwriter and focus