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## **Death and the Australian rural romance novel**

### Abstract:

In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), Pamela Regis argues that all romance novels have eight essential elements including one she terms the 'point of ritual death'. This is a moment when the heroine and hero seem unlikely to overcome the real or imagined obstacles preventing their 'happily ever after'. While the 'point of ritual death' can be literal or metaphorical, romance novels traditionally opt for symbolic forms of death such as illness, failing or unsuccessful relationships, or brushes with real death for the heroine or other characters. Representations of ritual death in Australian rural romance novels appear intense in a conspicuous way. In rural romances, ritual death frequently takes on deeper, darker forms arguably amplified by the rural setting. Death also occurs outside the ritual death scene; the death of a family member may serve as a story's premise, a murder mystery may be entangled with the romantic plot or life and death may visit the rural characters at any time, especially where multi-generation families are concerned. This paper examines the representation of death in selected contemporary Australian rural romance novels published between 2002 and 2017. This article argues that literal and metaphorical representations of environmental, animal and human deaths appear in rural romances frequently and powerfully in various forms. Many rural romance novels fearlessly conjure existential realities that reinforce death as a vital part of the cycle of life.

### Biographical note:

Lauren O'Mahony is a Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies in the School of Arts at Murdoch University, Western Australia. Her PhD research focused on the narrative conventions of romance and feminism in Australian chick lit including the rural romance novel. Her research has been published in *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, *Communication Research and Practice* and *TEXT* journal. In 2013, Lauren won a Vice-Chancellor's Teaching Excellence Award.

### Keywords:

Creative writing – Australian rural romance novel – Death

Core of my heart, my country!  
Her pitiless blue sky,  
When sick at heart, around us,  
We see the cattle die –  
But then the grey clouds gather,  
And we can bless again  
The drumming of an army,  
The steady, soaking rain. (Dorothea Mackellar 'My Country')

## Introduction

When readers recall Australian rural romance stories they have encountered, they are sure to recollect narrative moments of literal and metaphorical death. In the iconic novel *Jillaroo* (2002), death is constantly present; the heroine's brother hangs himself in the farm's killing shed when the farm is gripped by a seemingly endless drought. The farm's river has become a 'thin stretch of silver' while animals and humans alike suffer amid the 'barren and heartless' landscape (Treasure 2002: 253). Kelsey Neilson's *Coolibah Creek* (2015) sees Maggie, the heroine's best friend, drown herself à la Virginia Woolf in a swollen river by 'scoop[ing] up big handfuls of mud and place[ing] them [in a ball] in the billowing skirt of her nightdress' (130). Maggie's suicide is driven by feelings of hopelessness and desperation after having a baby fathered by her extramarital lover, an Aboriginal stockman. *The Barkcutters* (2010) sees one of the novel's female protagonists, Rose, die because of the difficulties of living on the desolate and lonely frontier; most of her children have succumbed to a mystery illness and her husband has had her lover killed. Rose appears to lose the will to live; she stops eating and drinking, adamant this is 'one decision [...] her husband could not control' (Alexander 2011: 424). Examples of tragic and seemingly unnecessary human death symbolise the powerful presence of death in Australian rural romance novels.

The contemporary Australian rural romance genre emerged in 2002 when Rachael Treasure's *Jillaroo* was published (O'Mahony 2014a, Mirmohamadi 2015, Teo 2017). Set in the 1990s and early 2000s, *Jillaroo* tells the story of eighteen-year-old Rebecca Saunders, a woman determined to take over the family farm from her patriarchal father, Harry. Women living and working in rural, remote and outback Australia have a long history in the nation's fiction (see Morris 1991, Flesch 2004, Haynes 2010, Teo 2012, 2014, 2017). As Jill Conway has noted, fiction and poetry in the late nineteenth century emphasized the bush woman's stoicism in the face of remote living, extreme weather and solitude (1985). Hsu-Ming Teo argues that colonial romances depict an incompatibility between romantic love and marriage while novels published after Federation valorised the bush and were 'more likely' to have happy endings (2017). The entanglement of romance and topical issues has occurred more widely in Australian romances and is traceable to early colonial romance novels (See Gelder and Weaver 2010, Vivanco 2012). However, the contemporary setting of *Jillaroo*, and of rural romance novels more widely, entwines romance with current rural issues including those related to gender, health and well-being, farming practices and climactic variation. Perhaps it is this combination of romance, remote non-urban settings and the exploration of complex issues – especially the impact of death on rural heroines – that

contributes to the genre's success, with the rural romance genre reportedly the most successful in recent Australian publishing (Neill 2015).

The setting, including the emphasis on 'place', and focus on farming may partly explain the regularity with which death appears in rural romance novels. Bronwen Levy has remarked that Australian romance fiction set beyond the city limits shows the 'real' and 'dangerous' Australia (1987). Sociologically, the 'rural' implies a sparsely spread population where residents may experience isolation and limited access to resources or services. The 'rural' also connotes specific kinds of human relationships, as I have previously observed of rural romance novels:

Heroines are embedded firmly within a single family or multiple-family dynamic, one that often includes siblings and in-laws. This social dynamic often invites complicated relationships between heroines, their families and their properties. (2014a)

Farming and pastoral properties can house multiple generations of families including in-laws and distant family members alongside full-time and seasonal workers. Much farm work occurs outside the home; farming success is constantly subject to the whims of weather, flora and fauna and the skill, professionalism and pragmatism of one's co-workers. The rural, remote or outback settings featured in this genre emphasise the strong ties to place and 'the land' – ties that, moreover, anticipate the ever-present spectre of death.

This paper explores the representation of death and its significance in Australian rural romance novels, firstly, by explaining the function of death in literature generally and in romance narratives specifically. In this, I draw upon Pamela Regis's 'point of ritual death' (2003: 15) – an essential element of the romance narrative – to explain the significance of death in the genre, then analyse literal and metaphorical instances of human, animal and environmental death in selected Australian rural romance novels. I argue that death may act as a part of a story's premise; it may be a mystery tied to the central romantic relationship or, alternatively, may instigate a reconfiguration of a heroine's choices if inserted mid-way through a story. A discussion of all rural novels that represent death, of which there are many, is beyond the scope of this current paper. Instead, I draw key examples from rural novels I have encountered since the early 2000s, particularly those that illustrate generic motifs or innovative narrative uses of death imagery or death events. These examples demonstrate that the genre widely and consistently engages with death, using particular narrative strategies to do so – a useful insight for aspiring writers of rural romance fiction. Lastly, I explore the function of death in rural romance sequels, particularly how sequels may 'kill the romance' established in their predecessors. This paper argues that death is a powerful thematic and structural presence in the rural romance genre, especially in relation to the construction of romance heroines.

### **Death in literature, death in the romance genre**

Skelton writes that 'One of the central tasks of literature is to impose a structure on life and death, giving meaning to both' (2003: 213). Throughout life, as humans we are conscious to varying degrees that death is ever-present and may call on us at any time.

We may glimpse death vicariously through the experiences of others or attempt to process our thoughts on death through our own grief when a loved one dies. Because of death's ineffability, literature and other cultural forms can offer insights into what will one day happen to each of us. Death is a universal theme in literature from Shakespeare's tragic characters to the haunting war poetry of authors Wilfred Owen, William Butler Yeats and William Blake, and to the deaths of principle characters in novels by Jane Austen, Emily Brontë and Charles Dickens. Clearly, representations and interpretations of death mean different things to different authors as well as 'different things at different times' (Skelton 2003: 211). For Skelton, literature can perform an important function for readers; it may help them to communicate their ideas or feelings around death or serve a cathartic purpose. To engage individual readers, representations of death must therefore be suited to the narrative they are housed in and orient to readers' expectations. Death can be central and powerful or appear 'so casual and mannered that [it has] no real power at all' (Skelton 2003: 216). For Skelton, representations of death may vary according to genre: mystery and detective novels can utilise a 'body' to prompt an investigation, tragedies can probe death's meaning and what constitutes a 'good death' while metaphorical death may be dreams, hopes or aspirations not realised. Death need not always befall human characters; it can affect animals, the environment or inanimate objects.

Death, whether human or non-human, serves an important and constant function when defining and structuring romance novels. For Pamela Regis, a romance novel is 'a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines' (2003: 19). Regis argues that romance novels contain eight essential elements:

[A] *definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the *meeting* between the heroine and hero; an account of their *attraction* for each other; the *barrier* between them; the *point of ritual death*; the *recognition* that fells the barrier; the *declaration* of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their *betrothal*. (14, original emphasis)

For Regis, these elements 'take a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free' (30) and 'restore' her life 'to her' (16). When a heroine overcomes obstacles and barriers, as Regis explains, and 'achieves freedom, she chooses the hero' (16). Readers 'rejoice' (11) from observing a heroine's successful transit from encumbered by one or more barriers to the freedom symbolised by her union with her hero. Most relevant to the discussion of death in rural romance novels is Regis's essential element, the 'point of ritual death', a moment: 'marked by death or its simulacrum (for example fainting or illness); by the risk of death; or by any number of images or events that suggest death, however metaphorically (for example, darkness, sadness, despair, or winter)' (14).

This element need not contain real death; a figurative or symbolic death is equivalent (such as fraying relationships or a brush with death via an accident that leaves someone unconscious or otherwise out of the picture). The 'point of ritual death' is when a happy ending seems unlikely and, in some cases, impossible. Regis explains that a 'point of ritual death' directly affects the heroine; she is 'threatened, either directly or indirectly, actually or symbolically' (15). In this, Regis emphasises the important relationship

between a romance heroine and ritual death, as she explains, '[h]er escape from ritual death involves an overthrow of the most fundamental sort. It is death itself that is being vanquished, and life itself that the heroine will win' (15). Regis suggests that the presence of death may differ between romance novels whereby some novels may treat death lightly while others will be excessively grim. Overcoming death is one of two 'liberations' that Regis argues are integral to romance novels. Firstly, the heroine overcomes one or more barriers impeding her union with her love interest and secondly, as Regis states, 'she cheats ritual death, symbolically or actually, and is freed to live' (15). Regis cautions that the freedom found by a heroine is 'often provisional' (16). This notion of provisional freedom becomes important later in this paper when I discuss the potential complications that may arise in relation to romance with the publication of a rural romance novel sequel.

Regis's theory of the essential elements governing romances therefore attests to the importance of death in this genre. Death is central to the extended definition of romance and the heroine's journey. However, some types of romance including chick lit, seem to minimise the presence of death or attempt to avoid death altogether. Australian chick lit novels tend to favour figurative death over literal death (O'Mahony 2015). One exception is the chick lit subgenre, 'widow lit' (Missler 2017). The rural romance genre however differentiates itself from chick lit and the wider romance genre in its representation of death as a regular narrative and thematic strategy.

### **The rural romance genre and death**

Frequent instances of death appear in the rural romance genre. They include the literal deaths of humans, animals and the land as well as businesses and farming dynasties. More figurative and metaphorical representations include the death of relationships, aspirations and dreams and extremes of weather that have a detrimental effect on the environment. The prevalence of death in rural romances could well pay homage to its colonial fiction predecessors where men would battle the environment, fight for survival and struggle to make a living. The colonial representation of Australian rural or bush landscapes saw women's place constantly questioned (O'Mahony 2014a, Schaffer 1988). Arguably, a gothic air blows through the rural romance genre. However, the frequency of real, somewhat functional death, suggests an avoidance of the effects that gothic texts aim to produce. Gerry Turcotte explains that gothic texts conjure a kind of 'spiritual malaise':

[T]hrough a literary form which emphasises the horror, uncertainty and desperation of the human experience, often representing the solitariness of that experience through characters trapped in a hostile environment, or pursued by an unspecified or unidentifiable danger. (1998: 1)

Certainly, rural romances project horrors, uncertainties and human desperation much like their colonial forebears, yet as this paper argues, such representations are rarely associated with the unknown. Rather, there is a matter-of-factness and everydayness to deathly incidents to the point that characters seem well accustomed, though often surprised, when death occurs in its various forms.

Literal death frequently occurs in rural romances. Although rural romance heroines rarely die themselves, they often confront the death of important people in their lives, many of them males. Such deaths occur at different stages of the romance and therefore perform slightly different narrative functions. Family members, partners and husbands, friends and community members die in accidents, suicides and murders. Some of these deaths act as a story's premise. For example, the heroine of Karly Lane's *North Star* (2011) is bequeathed a run-down property back in her hometown when her grandfather dies. The inheritance prompts her move to the property and her reintegration back into the community. Accidental death frequently befalls male characters such as the heir of the vast Wangallon station, Cameron, in Nicole Alexander's *The Bark Cutters*. Cameron dies suddenly in a horse-riding accident early in the novel thereby throwing the patrilineal succession plans of the senior male family members into disarray. With no other male heir to assume control of Wangallon, they reluctantly consider Sarah, Cameron's sister. For Sarah, Cameron's death provides the opportunity to break the cycle of patrilineal succession. Rachael Treasure's *The Stockman* sees heroine Rosemary Highgrove-Jones reappraise her life after the sudden death of her fiancé Sam in a car accident. Rather than becoming a farm wife writing the local newspaper's social pages, Rosie longs to work on the land. When she learns that Sam died in the back of a ute tray while in a tryst with another woman, she furiously describes herself as 'bloody pathetic' and a 'wimp' (2004: 44-5). The situation sees her undergo a cowgirl makeover, symbolic of her effort to remake herself, toughen up and pursue a destiny different to the one expected of her by her parents.

Deaths of prominent characters can contribute to the premise of a rural romance while infusing the narrative with mystery and intrigue. Novels such as Mandy's Magro's *Walking the Line* (2016), Kerry McGinnis's *Mallee Sky* (2013) and Karly Lane's *North Star* exemplify a style of cross-over fiction; they fulfil the generic expectations of rural romances and add a mystery element commonly found in detective novels. For example, Mandy Magro's *Walking the Line* sees journalist Charlize Dawson assigned to write a story about bull-rider Dallas Armstrong. Charlize is invited to stay with Dallas and his mother at their rural property. While the novel focuses on the developing relationship between Dallas and Charlize, it also explores how the recent death of Dallas's father in a car accident affects the family and wider community. Charlize eventually finds evidence that Dallas's father was harbouring a secret that led to his murder. Death in this novel is more than an accident and the subsequent grief it causes; death connotes a mystery that taps into anxieties about sexuality and reputation.

Death may also visit the plots of rural romances mid-way through a story. Such intrusions complicate the narrative or prompt the heroine to explore a new direction. In Rachael Treasure's *Cleanskin Cowgirls* (2014), heroine Elsie Jones endures the death of her new lover Jake in a night-time car accident when he hits a kangaroo. Jake's senseless death and the realisation that he had a girlfriend safely secreted in the city leads Elsie to make a series of fateful decisions. Such decisions take her further away from reconciling with her 'true hero' – her childhood sweetheart – and prevent her returning 'home' where she will ultimately find redemption. Novels such as *Cleanskin Cowgirls* depict the unexpected deaths of important men mid-way through a romance narrative as a precursor to change and adventure. Unexpected deaths, whether the

premise of a romance narrative or a complication mid-way through, provide an opportunity for heroines to explore their options, in some case leading them to challenge stereotypical roles for rural women or journey toward a figurative rebirth in terms of identity and life choices.

Literal death in rural romance novels may take the form of a character committing suicide. In a rural context, suicide, especially that of young men, is an important contemporary issue, mainly because of the frequency with which it occurs. Page and Fragar's study conducted between 1988 and 1997 found that one Australian male farmer committed suicide every four days (2002). As Judd et al. outline, suicide may result from a range of factors such as 'loneliness, social isolation and relationship breakdown' (2006: 1), mental and physical ill health or the ability to access a range of self-harm devices. Other contributing factors in suicide may include 'financial and business-related problems, reluctance to seek help' and 'a more functional attitude toward death' (Judd et al. 2006: 1-2). More recently, the National Rural Health Alliance stated that rural and remote male suicide is 1.3 to 2.6 times more likely to occur compared to men in urban locations (2009). The rural romance genre represents male suicide as way to draw attention to this issue and potentially encourage reflection and discussion by readers. In a narrative sense, suicide of a male family member can intensify the ritual death element of romance novels. Rachael Treasure's *Jillaroo* represents the suicide of Rebecca's brother Tom as a tragic and unnecessary action. Elsewhere, I argue that Tom's suicide provides a very real, and irreversible, death central to the ritual death scene (2014a, b). Tom's tragic death is amplified by the death of animals and ebbing of life from the land in the grip of drought. Rebecca responds to Tom's death by falling into paralysing grief. Her father Harry, however, is moved, largely by guilt, to change himself and treat his family more carefully. Harry's change after Tom's death offers the opportunity for rebirth and renewal tied to the story's resolution.

Rural romances also show women ending their lives when they find themselves in very difficult situations. As noted in the Introduction above, two prominent examples of female suicide occur in *The Bark Cutters* and *Coolibah Creek*. *Coolibah Creek's* Maggie drowns herself in a swollen river. Like Rose of *The Bark Cutters*, Maggie's situation is bleak. While her husband and children are away from the property, Maggie naturally induces labour by drinking castor oil. Soon after her child is born, it is clear to Maggie from the child's hair colour and skin tone that the baby's father is not Maggie's husband, but her Aboriginal lover Lance. Maggie sees no alternative but to end her own life, implied by the narrator through references to her 'sure and precise' actions, 'the task at hand' and 'her goal' (Neilson 2015: 126-7). Alone in the homestead, Maggie gathers baby products and two bottles of freshly pumped breastmilk, settles the baby, who she names Charlotte, and leaves a note for Lance who will arrive at the homestead early in the morning. The note innocently states that Maggie has left the house in search of her cat by the creek and asks that he should feed baby Charlotte. The narrator reveals to the reader Maggie's thoughts that she states were 'too risky to write': '*Darling Lance, I know you'll run with Charlotte. I know you'll love her and care for her, maybe even die for her. God grant you the strength to make it through the rain and the floodwater*' (129). Maggie's hope is that if Lance flees with baby Charlotte, there

will be little clue to the child's true origins. Moreover, Maggie's death in the river will lead to the presumption that the baby has also perished in the floodwaters. To the other characters, Maggie's death is accidental, though readers know it was carefully engineered to appear a suicide and conceal both the baby's paternal heritage. Maggie's death presages the novel's point of ritual death when the heroine's husband Andy is violently gorged by a bull. From this point on, *Coolibah Creek's* heroine Bec grieves Maggie's loss and endures her husband's ongoing unconsciousness after his accident. Bec is at the centre of these two encounters with death. Despite her grief, she must continue to run the family farm, even later when she discovers she is pregnant. *Coolibah Creek* shows how death can anticipate and intensify the ritual death element. Death offers an opportunity for the heroine to demonstrate her ability to endure the most difficult of circumstances.

Given that rural romances often explore relationships within multi-generational family units, deaths frequently occur as the result of age-related illness. In some cases, readers learn matter-of-factly that a parent or grandparent has died. Despite the brevity of such descriptions, such deaths can have deep ramifications for rural romance heroines. In Rachael Treasure's *The Farmer's Wife* (2013), readers learn that in the intervening years since the original novel *Jillaroo*, the family patriarch Harry Saunders has died. In *Jillaroo*, Harry was an obstructive presence who drove away his family members and nearly ruined the family farm beyond redemption. In *The Farmer's Wife* however, readers learn of Harry's death and unfortunately, that Rebecca's husband Charlie has taken his place, now 'a carbon copy' of her father (Treasure 2013: 202). Readers familiar with *Jillaroo* are positioned to interpret the association of Charlie with Harry to signal that Rebecca faces challenges similar to those she experienced with her father. *The Bark Cutters* similarly mentions a patriarch's death and unpacks the implications for the heroine. Sarah Gordon's grandfather Angus dies at the end of *The Bark Cutters* thereby providing the premise of the sequel, *A Changing Land* (2011). Angus's death creates a problem in terms of inheritance; he has left Sarah a thirty percent share of the property, thirty percent to Anthony, the station manager who is also Sarah's fiancée, and thirty percent to a distant Scottish relative. The remaining ten per cent has been left to Sarah's father, who has no interest in running or managing the property. *A Changing Land* then explores the fallout of Angus's death inclusive of the battle to safeguard and control the family property. In both *The Farmer's Wife* and *A Changing Land*, the incidental death of a family patriarch, reported briefly, actually has significant implications for each heroine. In *The Farmer's Wife*, Rebecca must address the vicious circle of men in powerful positions in her life, first her father then her husband; she must find a way to disentangle herself from her relationship with Charlie while protecting herself, her children, her animals and the land she loves so much. In Sarah Gordon's case, while her grandfather's death finally provides her with a large share of the family property, the complicated split ownership negatively affects her romantic relationship with Anthony and Wangallon's day-to-day management. In both cases, the death of patriarchs is no straightforward matter even if reported to the reader straightforwardly.

The frequency of death in the rural romance genre may well suggest that this setting is fraught with danger, innumerable risks and the daily potential for suffering. Yet, this



genre appears to have an economy where life and death are companions. When death affects a heroine's family members or friends through accident, misadventure or suicide, it may bring new energy and possible changes in attitude, action or life purpose. Though heroines have brushes with death, they do not die themselves. Rather, death's role in romance, especially when it occurs within the ritual death scene, is as Regis argues, an opportunity for the heroine to overcome adversity and ultimately be 'free to live' (2003).

### **Killing the romance?: the power of the rural sequel**

Most rural romances are standalone narratives that offer readers a definitive happy ending in 'betrothal' – whether in marriage or the promise of long-term commitment. The impression of 'happily ever after' hermetically seals the heroine and hero's relationship with little need to comment further about their future. However, two rural romance authors have published sequels that delve deeper into the romantic relationship of an earlier novel within the confines of a familiar fictional world. Sequels can be motivated by the popularity of a much-loved protagonist and the desire of readers to discover the afterwards of a happy ending (Schellenberg 1988: 97). Sequels have the potential to unsettle the endings of their predecessors. As Michael Austen suggests, sequels call into question the closure and finality in any ending (2005: 486). The attention drawn to endings seems even more important when dealing with romance novels, especially since so much emphasis falls upon the romantic ending, one that is mostly 'happy' and results in a 'betrothal', either figurative or literal. A romance sequel can therefore unpick a happy ending that was worked so hard for in an original text. Two sets of two rural romance novels, one by Nicole Alexander and the other by Rachael Treasure, see sequels undo the romantic relationship that was central in the original text. Each set of novels uses the sequel differently to chart the heroine's romantic life.

In Alexander's rural romances, *The Bark Cutters* and its sequel *A Changing Land*, readers see a relationship established then faced with turmoil before a reconciliation that prompts a new happy ending. The first novel's happy ending continues initially in *A Changing Land* but deteriorates quickly as the couple experience the reality of running their large rural property with ballooning bank loans and unfavourable weather. Taken alone, *The Bark Cutters* straightforwardly charts the developing relationship between Sarah and Anthony on a family run property, Wangallon. Initially, Sarah Gordon is told that her brother Cameron will assume control of Wangallon. After his sudden death, a jackeroo, Anthony, is hired to manage the property. Meanwhile, Sarah flees to Sydney to pursue other interests. Eventually, Sarah's ailing grandfather Angus informs Sarah and Anthony that if they worked the farm together, he would bequeath them a thirty per cent share each in his will. Having noticed the attraction between Anthony and Sarah, Angus tells them 'if you two swallow your pride and ignore everyone else, the partnership will be sealed by marriage' (Alexander 2010: 473). Those who only read the first novel will most likely accept the hermetic seal around Sarah and Anthony's romantic relationship, believing the happy ending to be firm and enduring.

Readers who delve into the sequel however will find the happy ending that was so certain in *The Bark Cutters* firmly undermined. With Angus now dead, Sarah and Anthony struggle to run the farm together. They experience constant miscommunications that result in lengthy arguments and a mutual loss of trust. Readers may even fear that Sarah and Anthony will never overcome the new barriers impeding their relationship. Anthony appears intent on avoiding Sarah in preference for the company of a backpacker with 'bright forgiving eyes' at the local pub (Alexander 2011: 169). The growing fear of romantic dissolution for Anthony and Sarah may exhort readers to hasten their reading to discover if their companionate love will be restored in the conclusion, or whether the narrative will introduce a new hero for Sarah. Indeed, the point when a romantic ending to the sequel seems most unlikely is when Anthony nearly dies in a motorbike accident. Sarah discovers his lifeless body and despite their previous arguments and differences, her fear of his death evokes her declaration of love accompanied by a desperate plea for him to 'come back' (430). Although severely injured from his near-death experience, Anthony does recover. At the same time, readers learn of Sarah's pregnancy with a new Wangallon heir. Despite their differences, Anthony and Sarah realise that their mutual love encompasses their love for Wangallon, a property that both have fought hard to preserve. *A Changing Land* therefore uses its narrative to undermine, question and temporarily deaden the romance between Sarah and Anthony. Subsequently, Alexander's Wangallon novels illustrate the prevalence of literal and metaphorical deaths as well as ebbs and flows in the romance plot.

Author Rachael Treasure also experiments with the death of narrative romance in the best-selling *Jillaroo* and its sequel *The Farmer's Wife*. The sequel re-enters the life of the much-loved heroine, Rebecca Saunders, to find out how her happy ending to Charlie Lewis played out. Unfortunately, readers discover *Jillaroo's* happy ending has turned into an unhappy beginning in *The Farmer's Wife*. In doing so, readers are reminded that happy endings capture a moment where, as Regis suggests, a couple is 'happy for now'. The book cover of *The Farmer's Wife* states the novel's premise: 'She got her fairytale ending – but life had other plans'. The sequel begins some ten years after *Jillaroo's* conclusion; marriage, two children, the death of her father and the demands of farm life have eroded Charlie and Rebecca's supposed 'utopian' relationship. The sequel novel therefore starts with the death of romance and love.

As the sequel's chapters unfold, readers begin to understand how badly life has turned out for Rebecca. Indeed, her life becomes much worse before it gets better. At thirty-eight years of age, the once vibrant Rebecca now has 'deep worry lines on her forehead', her blonde hair is now 'dry and brittle on the ends' and she has 'bags of puffy skin' under her eyes (Treasure 2013: 3-4). She is also 'always mad' and 'always sad' (10). Charlie, the once 'sun-kissed god' (6), has thinning hair and a 'rotund belly' (11) from years of unhealthy food, soft drinks and abundant beer. While her relationship and marriage to Charlie started off 'equally', motherhood has forced Rebecca to withdraw from managing the farm to stay at home because, as Charlie tells her, '[s]omeone's gotta do the house stuff' (10). Rebecca has also suffered untreated postnatal depression, a condition made more difficult by the remote farm location away from support and help. Even though her father has died, readers see that men still control Rebecca's life.

Charlie, like Harry before him, has mismanaged the farm to the verge of environmental and financial catastrophe. The threat of losing the farm is compounded when Rebecca confronts Charlie with her suspicions of his infidelity and to inform him that she is pregnant with his child. Unconvinced the child is his, a heated argument ensues. At his lowest ebb, Charlie attempts to rape Rebecca during a violent physical assault. After Charlie has fled the farm, Rebecca discovers his other brutalities: he has shot her much-loved elderly dog Stripes and 'butchered' her horses (Treasure 2013: 201). His violence mirrors Harry's behaviour in *Jillaroo* when he murders his dogs, not even burying their corpses (O'Mahony 2014b). In the last days of her relationship with Charlie, readers learn that Rebecca is primarily dealing with her loss of self after marrying Charlie. The end of her relationship with Charlie is a point of ritual death; the romance is gone, the marriage is dead and, in a way, the Rebecca of *Jillaroo* has metaphorically died too.

In approaching the sequel to *Jillaroo* this way, readers are reminded that happy endings are not the same as 'happily ever after'. *The Farmer's Wife* writes beyond or challenges the expectations and stereotypes of the romance genre. The novel questions the happy ending while emphasising the possible mutability of romance narratives. *The Farmer's Wife* goes one-step further in its challenge to expectations readers may have of romance novels: it resists installing a new suitor for Rebecca who brings her a proper 'happily ever after'. Certainly, Rebecca meets and is attracted to her neighbour, the wealthy and highly cultured Sol Stanton, who, it transpires, is unmarried. Once Charlie is out of Rebecca's life, her attraction to Sol starts to simmer; however, only near the end of the novel do the barriers keeping them apart start to dissolve. With no marriage or farm, Rebecca decides to take her children to the United States to work on an environmental education project. As she is about to depart, Sol, who has been noticeably absent through the novel's last chapters, arrives and announces that his family has purchased Rebecca's family farm Water's Meeting away from the clutches of a mining company. Rebecca and Sol's declaration of love soon follows, unspoken to each other but revealed to the reader when they hug: 'In that moment, she knew: she loved this man' (Treasure 2013: 384). When they kiss 'deeply', the narrator notes that it too is 'with love' (384). Sol has a promising future with Rebecca: he intends to regenerate the land and build an environmentally friendly house. He tells Rebecca that she and her children will be 'very welcome there' (386). At first, Rebecca panics in realising that she 'adores' Sol while knowing she must go to the United States. Sol reassures her, he would not 'dream of stopping her' (386) and emphasises that, 'This is a long-term project ... for both of us. And we shall see what happens between us, sí?' (386). This scene marks multiple recognitions; Rebecca and Sol love each other, Water's Meeting will be saved and regenerated and lastly, Rebecca's future appears filled with hope. Finally, the intense deathly mood is shaken from the novel and, even if temporarily, from Rebecca's life. Yet, in removing death, the novel only *suggests* a future with Sol and a reunion with the land that Rebecca loves so much. In this sequel, the heroine's goal is not to find a 'male erotic partner' or to have a 'happily ever after' with him. Rather, the goal and object of romance is foremost 'the heroine herself' (Philips 2006: 2). In this way, *The Farmer's Wife* demonstrates the cycle of death and rebirth as it relates primarily to the heroine, Rebecca. She is reborn towards the end of the sequel, returning to her maiden name 'Rebecca Saunders' a renewed version of herself.

These two sets of novels demonstrate two different ways of using narrative structure to challenge the fidelity of romance plots, including 'happy endings'. Sequels can temporarily deaden a romantic relationship or show how time can negatively affect a once vibrant love affair. These multi-novel rural romance sagas demonstrate that a powerful death theme runs through the genre. The presence of death can impact romance as well as the cycle of 'rebirth' and renewal as it relates to the heroine.

### **Conclusion: death's omnipresence in rural romance**

Death and death imagery serves a range of functions in rural romance novels. The death of important men in the lives of heroines can lead to changes in property ownership or management; death can invite mystery and intrigue or, often when it occurs mid-way through a narrative, trigger heroines to change their life. Figurative or symbolic deaths, dominate the 'point of ritual death' in rural novels. Yet, when literal and figurative deaths combine at the 'point of ritual death', such as in *Jillaroo*, this plot-point intensifies and readers are positioned to wonder how the heroine will surmount the obstacles before her. In the two cases mentioned of best-selling rural romances followed by a sequel, the continuity of the romance story is disrupted and thrown into doubt. Sequels can signify a temporary lull in a romantic relationship or the death of romance altogether for a couple. Such serial-type works play with the meaning of 'happy endings'. Central to the engagement with death in rural romance is the focus on the heroine's journey and development. For most rural heroines, death means change and in the long term, change is often for the better. Such changes tap into the cycle of death and rebirth; for rural heroines, death often provides opportunities to evolve, grow or take a new direction.

The wide and consistent engagement with death in rural romance novels suggests this form conjures existential realities that reinforce death as a vital part of life. In rural romances, life and death are inextricable companions; when one appears, the other is never too far away. Novels in this genre repeatedly meditate on life and death as they invariably connect to the identity of the romance heroine. The cycle of life and death offers opportunities for the heroine's own symbolic death and rebirth as she transits through life, always towards a 'happily ever after' that in the meantime will be marked by moments of 'happy for now'.

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