

Volume One, Creative Work

Tunnelling

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Abstract

Tunnelling, the first volume of this PhD is a memoir. It tells the story of my life working in the western trunk sewer project as an underground construction worker in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is also a story about my eldest daughter's recovery from a brain injury. She is in a 'tunnel' of a different kind. The ramifications of my early drinking years and her brain injury shaped my life, my wife's and my other children's lives in ways I could not have predicted back then. I have attempted to take the reader into the underworld of blue-collar workers and a family under siege.

Tunnelling follows on from my first memoir *Beaten by a Blow*. I spent seven gut-wrenching years working in the tunnel. It was not painful because of difficulties or hardships, but rather because of the mindlessness of our work, which took place in a tunnel that was five metres in diameter, eighty metres underground and seventeen kilometres long. We were the concrete gang, building and moving forms, cleaning out muck and pouring concrete.

At the same time my first daughter had developed a retarding form of epilepsy. The prognosis was a ninety percent chance of severe retardation, and an early death was possible. By the age of three it was clear she was not as bad as predicted, but she couldn't talk, walk properly, mix, or engage with us in any meaningful way. Around this time we started a home program for brain injured children. It involved lots of exercises designed to stimulate all her senses. Despite numerous setbacks, Nicole made it to school only to be confronted with years of bullying.

The story's other main strand follows me stopping drinking and joining Alcoholics Anonymous. Combining the teachings of A.A. and the ideas from my daughter's program, I start to change my life. My daughter's circumstances and my own issues have a profound effect on the dynamics of the family.

The exegesis, *Blue-Collar Work*, relates to one aspect of the memoir, as its title suggests. It sets the memoir in the context of some literary representations of work. It opens with an overview of a range of approaches to writing about work. Chapters one and two locate some of the problems Katharine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny have representing workers in *Working Bullocks* (1926) and *Sugar Heaven* (1934), respectively. Chapter three is about the kind of blue-collar work represented in *Tunnelling*. It traces the effect of Taylorism on work practices, and discusses the lack of agency for the tunnellers.

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Dennis McIntosh

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