



SHARON KERNOT



A NOVEL

UNDERGROUND
ROAD

'THERE IS DREAD IN THIS WORK COUPLED WITH A GREAT SENSE OF NORMALITY AND ORDINARINESS. THIS IS UNCOMFORTABLE, POLITICAL, "GET REAL" LITERATURE. THE FINAL SCENES ARE RIVETING.'

FRANCESCA RENDLE-SHORT

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UNDERGROUND ROAD



Sharon Kernot worked as a community support worker in a child protection agency in the northern suburbs of Adelaide for eleven years. She has an masters in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide and a PhD from Flinders University.

Sharon works now at the South Australian Writers Centre as Writer in Residence on the Disability Program, mentoring new writers and assisting them with their publishing goals. She has tutored at TAFE SA and Flinders University, and conducted many writing workshops for groups and schools over the years. Sharon is the co-founder of North Eastern Writers Inc. and was on the organising committee of the Gawler Poetry Readings for two years.

Underground Road is Sharon Kernot's first novel. It was short-listed in the Unpublished Manuscript category of the Adelaide Festival Awards in 2010. Sharon is also the author of a collection of short stories, *In the Shadows of the Garden*, and one of poetry, *Washday Pockets*. You can find her website at www.sharonkernot.com.au.

By the same author

In the Shadows of the Garden

Washday Pockets

A NOVEL

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Press

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To the Team –

Anne, Cathy, Cherylyn, Deb, Gaynor, Jacki and Liz

PART ONE

1

Edith peers through the lace curtains at the madman singing to her letterbox. She raps her knuckles on the window hoping to frighten him away. He doesn't hear, doesn't look at her. She races to the front door and just as she unbolts the latch and steps out onto the porch, he dips his wild grey head in a flamboyant bow and prances away.

'Leave my letterbox alone!' she calls to the back of his great lurching body then goes back to her green recliner by the window, smooths the lace net curtains and picks up her cryptic crossword puzzle. She puts on her reading glasses and scans the clues. Six Across: There's murder hidden in the farm (four letters).

'Funny farm, comes to mind,' she says aloud, thinking of the madman. Too many letters of course. She folds the newspaper and lays it on the armrest next to the window where the sunlight makes it easier to read. Murder ... in the farm ... the farm. Harm! She writes the word down in neat capital letters and reads the next clue. Not so steady Eddy (nine letters).

She frowns at the page. 'Not so steady ... Another anagram perhaps?' She shakes her head. 'It starts with an "H".' She taps the side of her chair with the pen as she thinks.

Out in the street, there's the rumble of a car engine. She looks over the top of her reading glasses and watches a white Toyota park next to Number 13. Two well-dressed young women get out. One of them has a clipboard in her hand. Edith stands and squints to get a better look. It's a government car, she can tell from the number plate. They're either from the Housing Trust, The Welfare or the police.

The workers stand at the front of the house for a moment and stare at the debris in the front garden, the peeling white paint of the fence, the long grass and overgrown weeds, at

four cardboard boxes full of empty beer bottles, the rusty blue and yellow trike in the driveway and the broken old sofa next to the front door.

Edith decides to have a closer look; she hurries out to inspect her letterbox even though she knows the postman hasn't been. The women are halfway up the drive when Edith lifts the lid and peers inside. There's nothing there – not even a fold of junk mail. In fact she can't remember the last time she had any. She's missed it. She likes to browse at the specials even though she can't afford them.

She mooches around the garden, tidies the hose by the tap and inspects the potted lavender by her front step whilst keeping an ear toward Number 13. The women knock a few times and wait but no one is home. One walks to the corrugated-iron fence and looks over into the back garden. Edith imagines the backyard would look as untidy as the front. She imagines piles of rubbish, a mangy cat or two and a broken swing set.

The women wait a moment more and then stroll toward the car. One picks up the old trike and moves it to the side of the drive. At the gate they pause and chat again then unlock the car, climb in and drive away.

Edith watches the back of the car until it turns the bend in the road. She's disappointed. She hoped the visit would bring some excitement, something of interest. She decides to stay outside in the sunshine for a little longer. She bends to pull a few sour sobs from the base of the letterbox until she hears the car engine again. She watches the workers cruise by in the direction they came as she tosses weeds into her wheelie bin.

Edith glances around her small garden. It needs a good mow but she doesn't have the inclination to organise it. She decides to go to the club instead. She hadn't planned to but the thought of going back to the crossword doesn't appeal.

She feels like company and the club is warmer and brighter. As she turns to go back into the house, she catches a glimpse of the blind move at Number 13. Someone *is* home. Suddenly the word 'hurricane' comes to mind.

2

Kenneth's feet beat an unsteady rhythm on the glistening pavement. His footfall is heavy, the heavier the better. He wants to leave a trail of his existence. The harshness of his rhythm is pragmatic too. The shudder through his body, the beat in his bones, soothe the voices in his head. Still them, if only briefly.

The mild winter sun pierces his skull, melts his brain. His body is slick with sweat and he reeks of something animal. He stops to mop his wiry eyebrows with the back of his hand and the voice invades. *You are a worthless useless piece of shit piece of fruit apples kill you hate onion. Cut.* Kenneth balls his fists and swipes the air. The voice is telling him secrets he does not want to hear. He marches onward. His wild grey hair leads the way and long skinny legs follow. His steps pound the path, punctuate the taunts. *On – ion cut on – ion cut.*

He belts out a grave baritone. 'The hills are alive with the sound of muuusiiic ...' His fists open, his march becomes a light two-step. He pirouettes. 'With songs they have sung for a thousand yeeeeears ...' He pauses and listens. His eyes flick from side to side. He checks his back to see if the voice is there. It's not. He skips along the path and sings. He hurls the finale into the quiet suburban air – a long reverberating note which leaves him breathless and elated.

'Bra-vo! Brrraaaa-vo!' He turns to the voice beside him and bows. 'Genius. Pure gen-i-us,' says the rusted mouth of a white letterbox.

3

Damien lies on the couch, stares at the TV and thinks even school would be better than having to stay home and watch the fairy show. The blinds are down making the fairies seem so bright, so real, they look like they could jump right out of the screen. His sister, Skye, loves it. She sings along with a screwed-up triangle of Vegemite toast in her hand. She takes a bite then chews and sings at the same time. She doesn't know the words, she just pretends. Her mouth is out of sync with the fairies. She twirls and jumps around. The lameness of it all makes Damien sigh, it comes out as a damp wheeze.

He'd like to go outside to get away from the fairies and their singing but the cold air makes his wheeze worse and it feels like someone is lying on his chest. At night, he sometimes dreams his mum, Kerry, is sitting on him. At other times he dreams it is Marcus. He's the heaviest, and Damien can't get any air.

Kerry leaps up from her seat and peers through the crack between the blinds. A slice of yellow light shoots across him. He leans forward to see what she's looking at.

'Leave it!' she hisses when he tries to open the blind further. Her face screws up like a ball of paper. 'And shut up!'

He rebounds to his seat. 'I didn't say anything.'

She glares at him so he doesn't argue. Outside, a car door slams.

'Fuck!' Kerry leaps off the chair, her nightie puffs up and floats around her like one of the fairy costumes on TV. She stabs the OFF button and the singing stops. Damien watches the picture fade and there's silence for one second till Skye gets over the shock of the fairies disappearing, puts two and two together and starts warming up her throat for one of her massive ear-splitting screeches. Kerry clamps a hand over Skye's mouth just as she starts up. '*Shush! Shut up! Not*

a word! Her voice is a scary, tight whisper. She drops to the floor and yanks Skye onto her lap. Skye's frown melts and her eyes open round, the whites glint.

Another car door slams. Both Kerry and Skye's faces are set with the same look of terror. Damien feels his breath slip away and he struggles to get air. He lies as still as he can and tries to wheeze quietly. He hears shoes on gravel, then clip-clops on the front step. There's a short pause, then the mumbled voices of women and three loud bangs. His heart pounds so hard it pushes blood into his ears. *Boom-boom. Boom-boom.*

Kerry grips Skye harder and shakes her head at Damien as if to say *don't move*. They wait. There's more talking outside. Damien watches the second hand work its way around the clock. His heart usually keeps time. Not today. Not now.

Bang bang bang. The knocking is louder this time. Damien wonders if they know someone is home. Maybe they saw his mum at the window when they drove up. He looks at her. Her eyes flash in the direction of her bedroom where Jamie is sleeping. She must be worried the noise will wake him. She grips Skye's mouth harder and Skye's eyes open so wide Damien wonders if her eyeballs will fall out of her head. He wonders who these people are and why his mum won't answer the door. Who could be so bad? Why is she so scared? If Marcus was here he'd answer it. He'd answer and straightaway he'd start yelling. He yells at everyone. It doesn't matter who it is.

They pound on the door again. Damien jumps even though he's expecting it. It's hard to get a breath. He needs to use his puffer but he can't move. He's too scared. The wheeze is getting louder. Something shifts in the bedroom and Jamie gurgles. Kerry's eyebrows almost join together. There's a rumble of mumbling on the other side of the door. Could they hear Jamie? Damien stares at the big brown stain in the middle of the carpet. He doesn't want to look at

his mum or Skye any more, they're making him feel worse.

He focuses on the stain and tries to get his breath back, tries to get his heartbeat out of his ears. It's a big stain in the shape of a tree or a puff of smoke. It starts off narrow and moves into a cloud shape, a mushroom cloud from an atom bomb. Marcus did it when he tipped over a bottle of black beer a long time ago.

It was a hot night, the front door was open and the screen wasn't on the latch. Marcus staggered into the house carrying a bottle in a brown paper bag. He walked straight into the kitchen without saying hello. Not that Damien cared, he just wanted to keep out of his way. He never knew if Marcus was going to be in a good mood or a bad mood or a plain evil kick-the-shit-out-of-everything mood.

He went into the kitchen, said something to Kerry and came back into the lounge with his bottle and a glass. He sat in his chair, poured himself a black drink and had a slurp of the foamy stuff on top. He put the bottle down on the floor and looked at the TV. 'What's this shit?' he asked.

'*Neighbours*,' Emily told him without taking her eyes off the screen. She was lying on the floor on her stomach.

'Where's the remote?'

Emily looked over her shoulder. 'I'm watching it.'

'It's crap. Where's the remote?'

'I'm watching it,' Emily whined.

Damien felt his skin start to prickle.

'Where is it?'

Emily didn't move but Damien could see the remote peeping out from under her chest.

Marcus drank and let out a loud burp. He looked over at Damien who flicked his eyes back to Harold on the TV who was shaking his head at someone. His long, saggy cheeks shook like a bloodhound's.

'Where the hell is it?'

Neither of them answered. Damien chewed his bottom

lip and wondered whether he should shrug his shoulders. He wondered if that would make it better or worse. He wasn't sure so he just sat there and pretended to be concentrating on Harold who was talking to another character on his nice green lawn.

'Where the fuck?' Marcus levered himself out of the chair just as Kerry was coming through the door with dinner.

'Here's your dinner, babe.' She was big and round with Jamie.

'Where's the remote?' he asked. 'And what's that?'

Damien wanted to get up. He wanted to get out of the room. The air had changed; it was thicker and harder to take in. He didn't move though, not a muscle. He didn't even blink.

'It's casserole,' Kerry said through her teeth. 'Beef casserole.'

'Don't we have any steak?'

'There's no money for steak.' Every word sent a shock wave of panic through Damien. 'I had to pay the electricity bill. Otherwise you'd have no hot water, no television and no bloody dinner at all.'

Damien held his breath and waited for an atomic explosion but Marcus didn't say anything, he just grunted and sat down while Kerry put the tray on his lap and left the room.

From the corner of his eye, Damien saw Marcus lean over and put his glass on the table. As he did, his left leg kicked out and knocked the bottle by his chair. Everything happened in slow motion after that. A strong-smelling beer leapt into the air. Marcus's head turned and the whites of his eyes flashed. Damien jumped from his seat and grabbed the neck of the bottle at the first sound of *glug*. He lifted it upright and stared down at the big dark stain growing on the carpet. There was a long pause as they watched the stain take shape. Damien wasn't sure if Marcus thought he knocked it over. For a minute, Damien wasn't sure if Marcus was going to

knock him over. Marcus's face cracked open, he showed his nicotine stained teeth and said, 'Good save, man! Good save.'

Kerry moves – just a bit. She flexes her leg and Damien sees two gigantic purple bruises above her knee peeping out from under her nightie. He hears the crunching of gravel near the side gate and imagines the women looking into the back garden with the long grass and rubbish and rusty swing. Jamie gurgles again but it's a bit louder, a little less happy. He'll start up any second like he does when he wakes up and then the house will fill with the sound of screaming baby. The people outside will hear it and know they're home. Damien imagines them breaking in, breaking the door down and finding them all hunched together with big eyes like scared rabbits in a dark hole.

The crunching footsteps start up again. They get quieter, move away, back down the drive. Damien's heart slows, his ears clear. He starts to relax a little. His breath is easier too, still wheezy but smoother. Jamie shouts something from the bedroom. Car doors slam and the car drives away.

Kerry lets go of Skye, pushes her off her lap and darts into her bedroom to see to Jamie. As if nothing has happened, Skye toddles back to the TV, turns it on and stands in front of the fairies. The Vegemite toast appears from her fist and she takes a bite. Kerry comes back with Jamie in her arms, half wrapped in his yellow blanket. The smell of poo wafts into the room with them. Damien grabs his puffer from the coffee table, shakes it and inhales. Jamie starts to cry and Kerry jiggles him up and down. '*Sh sh shhhhh*,' she says. He doesn't stop. He gets louder. '*Ssshhhhh*.'

'Who was it?' Damien asks, his voice raspy from the puffer.

Kerry doesn't answer, she opens the blind a crack, peers out to the road and another thin blade of light slices the lounge room.

4

Warm winter sun streams in through the lace curtains in the lounge and Mary reminds herself she has much to be grateful for. She glances at the clock on the dresser. It's almost ten. Jack will be home from his morning walk soon and will want to head off to do the grocery shopping. She sighs. She hates shopping with Jack.

He has to check the value of every item he puts into the trolley. It's difficult to mask her annoyance and frustration as they traipse from aisle to aisle. Everything has to be measured according to cost and this can be difficult because as Jack points out, you have to compare apples with apples. So Jack reduces the cost of each item down to its base unit – the price per gram or kilo, litre or millilitre – so he can compare. It's so time consuming and tedious that Mary sighs again at the task ahead. She's due at the community centre at twelve to help out with the free lunches. She'd prefer to get there earlier but that won't be possible with shopping first on the agenda. Occasionally, just occasionally, Mary would like to do things with speed. With wild abandon.

She smiles at the thought. That would have to have been in another lifetime. With another man. Besides, she knows at sixty-two even she is too old and set in her ways to do anything with wild abandon. She can't complain really, Jack has always been a good man, a reliable husband and provider. He's worked hard since he was fifteen, that's fifty years.

'Fifty years,' Mary repeats aloud, startling herself with her old woman's voice.

The cuckoo clock in the entrance hall creaks as the wooden doors open, a faded-yellow bird pops out and begins to cuckoo the hour. Years ago, when Mary suffered with insomnia, the clock became her enemy as it cuckooed every sleepless hour. She felt more and more desperate as

the morning approached and utterly exhausted by the time the birds outside joined the cuckoo and began their dawn song. She would have liked to throttle that cuckoo. Would have liked to get rid of the whole clock but it once belonged to Jack's great-uncle, the only thing of value either of them inherited, and besides Jack would never hear of it. She wondered how she had ever managed to function at all with so little sleep, totally frazzled. If it were not for Edith, she may not have.

Mary tightens her grip, her bony fingers clench the tops of her thin arms and she begins to pace in front of the window. She misses Edith. She misses the laughter. Everything is different now Jack has retired. She leans forward, cranes her neck in the direction of the street and sees Jack marching along the road with their golden retriever, Rex. She turns and reaches for her handbag on the coffee table so she will be ready to leave the minute Jack is organised. Out in the street, there's a sudden shout and savage barking. She rushes to the window. A tall, grey-haired man blocks the gate so Jack can't pass. Rex growls and snaps the air and Jack tries to hold him back. 'Let me through,' Jack shouts at the man.

Mary opens the front door and dithers, uncertain of what to do. Is the man a real threat? She's seen him trudging up and down many times but he seemed harmless.

'Here is your prison cell, your prison smell, your smelling, stinking, smouldering onion cage.' The man rattles the gate and bangs a fist on the top of the letterbox. Rex snarls.

'Let me pass!' Jack shouts.

'Smelling, stinking, rotting jail cell smell ...' The man pounds his chest with his fist.

Mary's heart thumps. 'Jack? Shall I call the police?'

'Yes! Now!'

She scurries down the passage to the kitchen, snatches the cordless phone from the cradle and dials triple zero as she races back to the front door. When she gets there, Jack

is standing inside the gate watching the crazed man stride down the street calling profanities to the air, his arms striking invisible demons.

Mary turns the phone off. 'Are you all right?' she asks Jack as he comes through the door.

'I'm fine,' he says brushing white dog hairs from his black trousers. 'Fine.' But she can see he isn't. His hands are shaking and there's a shimmer of sweat on his brow.