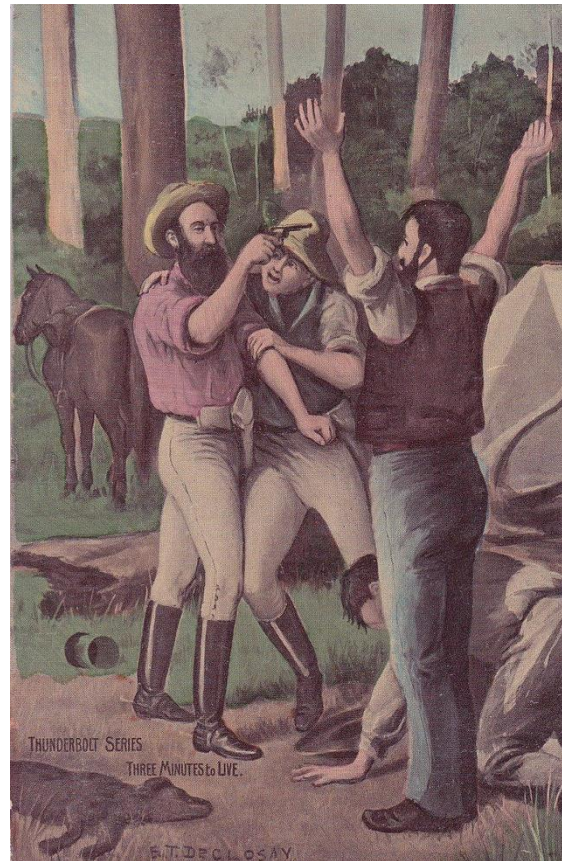


Bailed Up

By Nicole Crowe

While I was writing the first draft of the creative work for my Doctorate, I called it “memoir” with extreme reluctance. Then I met Murray Bail and, for a long time after, dropped the term entirely. In 2017 I was lucky enough to receive an Australian Association of Authors mentorship for emerging writers. With a newly minted first draft in hand, I was excited by the prospect of working with best-selling author Linda Jaivin for the next twelve months. In January I emailed the draft to her in Sydney and it just so happened that in February I would be taking part in a Varuna Writers’ Fellowship in the Blue Mountains. Linda suggested that I meet her for lunch in Kings Cross prior to my train journey to Katoomba. All of this sounded wonderful. The meeting went well. We ate excellent sandwiches; she gave me some great feedback and was enthusiastic about the draft’s potential. When we had finished our lunch, Linda offered to walk me back to the train station since I didn’t know Sydney that well. On the way to the station we ran into her friend, Murray, and Linda introduced me. “This is Nicole, an up-and-coming young writer on her way to *Varuna*.”

I had never seen a picture of Murray Bail and had honestly never heard of him. I have no



excuse for this besides the fact that my undergraduate degree was in journalism rather than literature and I am also an irredeemable philistine. Perhaps Murray Bail sensed these qualities in me because I’m sure he didn’t smile. What I am sure of is that his gaze was penetrating.

“So,” he said. “What do you do?”

“Um,” I mumbled. “Memoir.”

His gaze became more penetrating. “*You*,” he said, and then, after a long pause, “are writing

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a *memoir*?” I didn’t even know who this man was and yet I felt my insides shrink. I knew he was assessing my youth. I was thirty-five, far too young to have lived long and meaningfully enough to justify a memoir. And then, to make a bad situation worse, he wanted to know what I had *done*. In my handbag I had Linda’s edited copy of my draft and, for lack of any better ideas, I pulled it out and waved it in his face.

“I’ve *done* this.”

The first page was covered in red pen. Absolutely covered in it. And Murray’s eyes went straight to it. With one hand he lifted up his glasses and with the other, ran an index finger across the page. “That’s a bad opener,” he said as his finger traced the text. “And this paragraph here needs to be cut.” Half way down the page he grimaced. “Linda’s right. Cut this bit too.”

I returned the manuscript to my bag, confused as to why a man I’d just met would actually want to read the first page of my draft while standing in the middle of the street in Kings Cross.

“Do you know Murray Bail?” Linda asked me when we had bid our farewells and were continuing on to the station.

“No.”

“Oh, well, you should read *Eucalyptus*. It’s really quite good.”

I Googled him on the train to Katoomba, read about him winning the Miles Franklin and the Commonwealth prize and wanted to die. I tore up the first page of my draft and stuffed it into the train toilet. Murray Bail, one of Australia’s most celebrated writers, had made it abundantly clear that he didn’t think I was qualified to write memoir. For a long time after that, I told people I was writing “creative non-fiction.”

Image: “[Three Minutes to Live - Thunderbolt Seri](#)” (Public Domain) by [Aussie~mobs](#)