

Sustenance



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By Glenn Martin

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Author's Foreword

I started this book as a NanoWrimo (National Novel Writing Month) exercise – writing a novel of at least 50,000 words in one month, the thirty days of November. I didn't make the 50,000 words within the time, and I hadn't finished the story. Nevertheless, I wrote on most days, and the story was taking shape, so I kept going. The story was in my head and I had to draw it out and finish it.

I finished on 22nd December 2010, at around 77,500 words, about 20,000 words longer than *The Ten Thousand Things* which I had written twelve months earlier. (The refining and editing took somewhat longer.) The statistics are just for our amusement, of course. The real significance of writing a story in a defined time frame is that as a writer you live with the story in your head and there is an urgency to resolve it. I'd rather do this than agonise over a story for months or years.

Is there any significance in the length? Well, 50,000 to 70,000 words seems to work for many readers. It's long enough to enable immersion, but not so long that you have to put the rest of your life on hold while you finish it, or that you leave it unfinished.

There is the question of the novel's relationship to fact. In *The Ten Thousand Things* I was engaged with what happened in a particular period of my life, and the central story carried an essential relationship with what happened. I obscured some facts and compressed others for the sake of the coherence of the story and to allow it to stand as a novel rather than be scrutinised as history.

In *Sustenance* I have again started with history; all the main elements of the story align with reality. Yet I have felt licence this time to be more liberal. That wasn't so much because I wanted to diverge from history, it was because when the situation and the characters started flowing out onto the page, they often said and did things that I did not expect, and then I had to accommodate that. It's funny how people can

change over time, or more accurately, my perception of them and their possibilities has evolved.

In terms of chronology, the main story here predates *The Ten Thousand Things* by a couple of years.

Why do I care that my stories have a connection to history? Why do I disavow the generic disclaimer, which I imagine in many novels is gratuitous anyway, that everything within the pages of the said book is completely fictional, and bears no relation to any real circumstances or anyone living or dead?

It is because if something really happened, it cannot be dismissed as merely a flight of fancy, a wish intended to make the reader feel good. The incidents, the people and situations described here are not a flight of fancy.

My current work as a writer relates largely to the behaviour of people in organisations, and this book focuses on that subject. You might say it contributes to the literature on experiences in organisational life. There is a debate that goes on among managers in organisations, and among management educators, about the relevance of fiction to the personal development of managers. One view is that reading fiction is important because it sensitises managers to the human element in the workplace (that is, it reminds them that they are dealing with real people).

Managers tend to be good at dealing with logistics and the coordination of things. Where they fall down is when they have to consider that people are more than logistical widgets that fill slots and fulfil assigned functions. The reality is that people think in idiosyncratic ways and they have their own values and emotional needs that motivate them. Working with people effectively requires an understanding of human needs, and indeed, it requires empathy and even what we have to call, boldly, love.

The argument goes that reading fiction helps the manager to develop an awareness of the human aspect of the managerial role. But, goes

the opposing argument, why should a manager spend his or her time reading a story that someone has just made up? If it's fiction, then it's just fantasy, a form of escapism. The story might end nicely (or not), and seem to have a moral, but someone just invented that story and that ending. The whole point of management is to learn how to deal with what's real.

So I want to say that, in essence, this story really happened. I have massaged some of the facts about people and circumstances to create sufficient distance from any particular people and situations that have played a part in my personal history, but in terms of how people can behave in the workplace and in life, this story is an accurate reflection. I have changed names as well, because my intention is not to expose a particular set of events but to explore the lessons I learned from it.

A word about the I Ching. I introduced the I Ching in *The Ten Thousand Things* as a personal guide for living and for operating as a leader. The I Ching again plays its part in *Sustenance*. I make no apology to those who think this may be another form of superstition raising its ugly head, just when we thought science and rationality had thankfully triumphed.

All I would say here is, when you are a manager in the midst of a complex chain of human events and you have to make a decision, and the decision is not just a question of logistics but a question that defines who you are as a human, science will not help you, and nor is that its task. You need the wisdom of the ages, and for that you must tune into the spirits of wonder, morality, power and creativity.

There is one other comment I would make. You may wonder whether the novel is going to be weighed down by didacticism. Is the author so intent on making an educational point that the story is laboured and pretentious? I think not. The funny thing is, once you start writing, you have to let go of the need to preach. There is a story, and you just have to tell the story and hope, in retrospect, that the reader will find some value in it. Enjoy.

Chapter 1: The great sadness

When Janice told me she didn't want to see me anymore, I left her apartment and started walking down the stairs. Then there didn't seem to be any reason to keep walking, so I sat down, there on the stairs. The wall in front of me was glass, facing west, and it was afternoon. The sun streamed through and bathed me.

This wasn't the beginning of the great sadness. It happened because I was in the midst of the great sadness, a little boat bobbing in the ocean, and no land in sight.

The Tao says "what you gain is more trouble than what you lose; sustain your connection to the source"¹. What I had to lose was the sadness, and that went way back. Of course, it seemed to be necessary to bang my head against a brick wall for a while. I loved Janice in that desperate way that completely disregards reality, like the fact that should have been obvious to me, that she was largely indifferent to me. She kind of just wanted a boyfriend, just to see what it was like to have a boyfriend for a while.

My desperate love spawned poems and private heart-rending. It was love like throwing yourself off a cliff, expecting gravity to suspend its implacability and transform the moment into bliss. In the end, there was nothing there but falling. In retrospect I could be grateful that she said it: "I don't want to see you anymore". If she'd thought differently, I could have been hanging at the end of her string forever in the hope of an impossibility.

Better to sit so empty on her stair that afternoon. And in any case, Janice wasn't the source of the sadness. The sadness in which I was immersed was greater, deeper. The futile love was just a skirmish in its greater war, a playground where it could exercise its belligerent qualities. I knew it but I still ached for the dream of that love for Janice. I had thought that it would complete me, that there was an "us" that would make life wonderful.

These things were entangled with each other. I would have liked to have sorted it out before I had to go, but I figured I had to move off the stairs soon, and I was good at doing what I figured I had to do, so I got up and walked down the stairs. I got on my motorbike and rode away, wanting to shake off the weight by going somewhere.

Where did I go? I just went home, to my room. I avoided the desolation of bars, of small talk, repetitive stories, coarse laughter and cheap opinions. I didn't need company like that. I didn't need company. I was conscious of the tension between moving and standing still. Should I keep moving – running, working, talking, immersing myself in projects, making a social contribution, keeping busy? Or should I just stop? Would it be fatal to stop? Or self-indulgent? Or would stopping be the only thing that was important?

I realised that you can do both, in one way. It's perfectly possible to stop internally while you keep up outward activity. You can work, interact socially, study and even engage in recreational pursuits while you keep some part of you frozen. I did that. I just boarded up the house, as it were, and allowed the neighbourhood to carry on around it. I mowed the metaphorical lawn and cleared the metaphorical letters from the metaphorical letter box, without venturing any more inside the house.

Frozen. But all the time bobbing on this ocean. Wanting to believe my heart was broken by a girl. Well, large parts of me wanting to believe my heart was broken by a girl. The other parts saying, quietly, like water lapping at the side of the boat, "There's more to it than this. You know that. What is it?" I listened to the water lapping, over and over.

About the author

GLENN MARTIN (1950–) was born in Sydney, Australia and grew up there. He moved to the far north coast of New South Wales in the mid-1970s, seeking out a back-to-the-earth life style. He stayed in the area for 20 years, holding a variety of jobs: school teacher, community worker, social researcher and manager of organisations in the community sector.

His first two books were local histories: *Places in the Bush: A history of the Kyogle Shire* (1988) and *The Kyogle Public School Centenary Book* (1995). After gaining a Bachelor of Business with First Class Honours and the University Medal from Southern Cross University, he returned to live in Sydney. He works as a writer, editor and consultant on human resources, employment law, training and development, and business ethics.

Glenn has been the editor and principal writer for the CCH Australia publication, *Managing Training & Development* for over ten years. He has written chapters on human resources, training and ethics for several books, including the *Australian Master Human Resources Guide*. Glenn was the editor for *Training & Development in Australia* for five years. He currently edits the journal and other publications for Spirituality, Leadership and Management Inc.

Glenn's ideas on ethics are presented in the book *Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace* (2007; updated in 2010). His next ethics book (2011) is *The Little Book of Ethics: A human values approach*.

Glenn has also published two collections of poems and personal stories: *Flames in the Open* and *Love and Armour*. His first novel was *The Ten Thousand Things: A story of the lived experience of the I Ching* (2010). Glenn has five grown-up children and two grandsons.

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