2022 INSIDE STORIES

The Erratics
by Vicki Laveau-Harvie

Teaching notes prepared by Margaret Saltau

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VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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ABN 22 667 468 657 Inc. No. A0013525E

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Introduction and ways into the text

From the opening sentence of Vicki Laveau-Harvie's memoir, the writing leaps off the page in a mixture of horror and comedy. *The Erratics* is listed as an Australian text. The author lives in Sydney, but is originally from Alberta, Canada, and has lived in France; she 'has three passports and treasures the unique perspective this quirk of fate affords her.'[1] Most of the memoir is set in Canada, but when Australia is mentioned, a sense of freedom, of airy optimism is engendered. Australia is also important because, says Laveau-Harvie, it is as far away from her parents' home as it is possible to get, 'my sanity always dependent on living somewhere remote' (p. 135). Even the brief mentions of the writer's family 'on my far away island continent' (p. 136) function as a polar opposite of all we learn of her Canadian family.

At the time of the writing of this guide, Laveau-Harvie is 77 years old. Rather than write an autobiography covering the entirety of her life, which certainly sounds rich and bizarre enough to fill a much longer book, she focuses solely on the events of six years. After a lifetime of her mother's dangerously deranged behaviour, coupled with her father's meek acquiescence, and after an estrangement of twenty years, during which time the author and her sister had been 'disinherited and disowned' by their parents, this 'contained'[2] period that is the focus of this memoir starts in 2007 when her mother broke her hip and was hospitalised. Laveau-Harvie made many trips to Canada to Okotoks, five miles from the Okotok Erratic, to attempt to help her sister, who was living in Vancouver, care for their father and disentangle her parents' affairs. This is a manageable time span, and by using flashbacks which are triggered by events in therse years, she aimed to 'tell the truth to the best of your ability ... the truth of the heart of the matter.'[3] Laveau-Harvie's mother's death signals the end of these six years; the epilogue suggests that perhaps a kind of understanding has been achieved.

Some pre-reading activities

A research task on one or more of the following to provide students with ways into the text:

- Create a 'word hoard' for the text. Find as many words as possible for 'erratic', and find relevant examples from the book. This can be an on-going exercise. Which characters are 'erratic'? Could all the characters be considered 'erratic'? Is the word 'erratic' a perjorative term? Why?
- Map the text—students could construct a map of the book's setting. They could make choices as to how to represent it, but the aim is for them to be familiar with Canada, in particular, the landscape of Alberta, and The Okotoks Erratics.
- Research the geographical relationship between Alberta and Australia.

1 Author's biography prefacing *The Erratics*.
2 https://thegarretpodcast.com/vicki laveau harvie/
3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBfDW3SeIkQ

- Make notes about the author's journeys—her movements in time and place, and what is suggested by these. Where is Vicki Laveau-Harvie's home?[4] In so doing, students will also have begun to map the structure of the text.
- Complete basic research about Canada's history—its indigenous and colonial pasts, and how these are relevant in the text.
- Discuss—are there any commonalities between what we learn about Canada from this memoir, and Australia?
- Conside the nature of 'family'. Discussion prompts and writing exercises could encourage students to share stories about families. Although it can be cathartic to write about family problems, painful feelings should be avoided. Ask students to think of comic moments or events in their family history, anecdotes or habits of family members. There is very little loving physical contact described in *The Erratics*, so the instances of the sisters holding hands, and the uncle holding Vicki's hand are striking. How do details such as these evoke emotion? This can be preparation for a creative piece of writing.
- Find examples of family memoirs and writing which could be useful models for student writing. Use the following examples as a starting point to consider **what** the writers are conveying, and **how** they are doing this.
    1. In *My Family and Other Animals*, Gerald Durrell's account of the luggage accompanying his family members when they moved from England to Corfu gives us insight into each character:

        'So we sold the house and fled from the gloom of the English summer, like a flock of migrating swallows ... We all travelled light, taking with us only what we considered to be the bare essentials of life. When we opened our luggage for Customs inspection, the contents of our bags were a fair indication of character and interests. Thus Margo's luggage contained a multitude of diaphanous garments, three books on slimming, and a regiment of small bottles, each containing some elixir guaranteed to cure acne. Leslie's case held a couple of roll-top pullovers and a pair of trousers which were wrapped round two revolvers, an air-pistol, a book called *Be Your Own Gunsmith*, and a large bottle of oil that leaked. Larry was accompanied by two trunks of books and a briefcase containing his clothes. Mother's luggage was sensibly divided between clothes and various volumes on cooking and gardening. I travelled with only those items that I thought necessary to relieve the tedium of a long journey: four books on natural history, a butterfly net, a dog, and a jam jar full of caterpillars all in imminent danger of turning into chrysalids. Thus, by our standards fully equipped, we left the clammy shores of England.'[5]

        - What is the effect of the simile in the opening sentence?
        - What words would you use to describe the author's tone in the second sentence?
        - How does Durrell use objects, for example the contents of each character's luggage, to build their personalities?
        - What 'luggage' might you take with you if you were travelling to a new home? What would it show about your personality?
    2. French writer Violette Leduc portrayed the absence of maternal love with the sentence, 'My mother never held my hand' in her novel, *L'Asphyxie*. What does the lack of handholding signify?
    3. How do homes and rooms provide insight into character? How can a physical description of a room or house tell the reader about its inhabitants? Students could write short descriptive pieces about places they know.
    4. Sometimes an incident can seem funny in retrospect, illustrating the saying that comedy is tragedy plus time, but is difficult at the time. An example of this is Benjamin Law's account of his family's visits to the Gold Cost and Sunshine Coast theme parks after his parents split up. His story in *Growing Up Asian in Australia* is funny only because he is looking back, several years later. Students could describe a character or event from different perspectives in the future.
    5. In *The Erratics*, how do Laveau-Harvie's mother's bedrooms and their contents convey her character? What does her appearance tell us about her?
- Research narcissistic personality disorder, using it as a means to illuminate the mother's behaviour. (If this topic is painful for some students, there are many other ideas and issues to research and discuss in the text.)

4 Author's biography prefacing *The Erratics*.
5 https://www.bookscool.com/en/My Family and Other Animals 639186/1

Genre

Although not a great deal is known about this author, she has spoken about her book in interviews, and in her acceptance speech when it was awarded the 2019 Stella Prize for the best book by an Australian woman, whether fiction or nonfiction, in the previous calendar year. Laveau-Harvie makes use of the memoir genre, as she peels back the layers of her family's lives. She has commented that a compelling reason for her choice of genre—memoir as opposed to fiction—was that if she wrote it as fiction, readers would say, 'This couldn't happen'.[6] She uses the word 'florid' to describe much of the events she writes about; equally applicable are 'bizarre' and 'surreal'; yet she claims she neither embellished reality nor downplayed it.[7]

Most of us assume that we understand what to expect when we read a memoir. The word evokes and echoes the idea of 'memory', suggesting a personal account of an historical or biographical event.

Referring to his book *The Shark Net*, Australian author Robert Drewe defines his aim in this memoir as 'To try to make sense of this time and place'[8], writing about 'fictionalised fact'[9]. His description points to the unstable aspect of memory which contributes to an understanding of the genre, suggesting the slanted, slippery nature of our memories. Drewe also stresses the importance of context and setting—chronology and geography.

Memoir, according to Sven Birkerts, requires the juxtaposed perspectives of past and present, of what one recalls and how one recalls it[10]. The recollection should be intuitive rather than chronological, a 'felt past' allowing the themes of one's life to emerge. They should be as relevant to the reader as they are defining of the writer, 'universalizing the specific' in ways that assume 'there is a shared ground between the teller and the audience.'[11]

Less expansive, more limited in time and space than autobiography, memoir allows a writer to contemplate the meaning of particular events in retrospect, finding patterns and insights that may not have been obvious, or might have been too painful to deal with when they took place. A memoir does not pretend to be mere recording of fact; rather, it can be subjective and emotional. This is heightened by the use of the tools of the fiction writer:

- narrative voice and style
- structure including use of framing, foreshadowing and flashback
- characterisation
- imagery
- setting and landscape
- humour
- plot development

Truman Capote coined the generic term 'nonfiction novel', putting a true story into the form of a conventional fiction novel to describe his account of a seemingly motiveless murder, *In Cold Blood*. We can also apply this to *The Erratics*. Vicki Laveau-Harvie describes her text as 'creative nonfiction'.

An author often uses the writing of a memoir as a means to come to terms with a painful past, to understand, to heal and forgive. But *The Erratics* is much more than a therapeutic catharsis. In her Stella acceptance speech, Laveau-Harvie says, 'This prize rewards women who write truth—historical, political, and the truth of the heart and soul: the truth of individuals, of each of us, and the truth of the world we live in.'[12] These words provide us with a guide to her use of genre as a means of conveying 'the truth'.

As with many memoirs, the personal, slanted nature of the vision encourages us to perhaps question its veracity, or its reliability. When thinking of how to approach a creative response to *The Erratics*, we could consider how other characters, in particular the author's sister, saw the same events from a different point of view, from her own 'truth'.

Setting

The book was published in 2018, the author having begun to write it in 2010, halfway through the six year span beginning with her mother breaking her hip, and ending with her death. It is punctuated by Laveau-Harvie's visits to Alberta, Canada, and by the vivid evocation of the past which grows out of her contemporary experiences. An Australian reader can find commonalities of experience with

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBfDW3SeIkQ
7 Ibid.
8 Blurb on the back cover of Robert Drewe, *The Shark Net* (Australia: Penguin, 2000).
9 https://www.nla.gov.au/audio/robert drewe
10 Sven Birkerts, *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*. 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).
11 Ibid.
12 https://thestellaprize.com.au/2019/04/vicki laveau harvies 2019 stella prize acceptance speech/

aspects of Canadian life, but the physical landscape is an overwhelming and unique presence. Both the book's title and the prologue claim a significance for the landscape which transcends the literal.

One of the first things a reader notices about a book is its title; in the case of *The Erratics,* this is immediately confronting and we are thrown off balance. Expectations of an orderly set of reminiscences are confounded, patterns we might have expected are disrupted, continuity is not offered. Synonyms for 'erratic' provide us with a list of words which we would probably agree are the opposites of qualities exhibited by 'good' parents. In the prologue, the Okotoks Erratic, surrounded by 'uncommon beauty ... dominates the landscape, roped off and isolated, the danger it presents to anyone trespassing palpable and documented on the signs posted around it.' It is difficult not to apply this description to Laveau-Harvie's mother. In this way, the author fuses landscape with metaphor.

Laveau-Harvie poses 'One of those huge boulders' against the human world. Is she suggesting that her mother, and thus her family's experience, is some natural force, 'there' in the sense that the landscape is 'there', natural, impartial, not malicious?

The landscape of Alberta is a constant presence in the book, almost unbearably beautiful, and a looming threat in its overwhelming size and often inhospitable desolation. Near the opening, the author writes, 'In winter the cold will kill you. Nothing personal.' (p. 2) Followed by the introduction to the characters, the words 'dominates', 'isolated', 'danger', echo; we cannot help but apply them to the woman we meet in the hospital.

Like Australia, Canada has a colonial past. There is little reference to this past, or to Canada's First Nations people in the book, until the final pages where the myth of the Okotok leaves us with a sense of acceptance, even of the mother—'We do what we can.' (p. 216)

If Laveau-Harvie does not directly address Canada's colonial past and its heritage, if her memoir is of a white middle-class family, it does not necessarily follow that she ignores them. Throughout the memoir, our sense of the physical and social environment is a disturbing one. The landscape itself takes on the resonance of a character; the marks of the colonisers are always apparent.

Structure of the text

A prologue and 27 chapters

> '... it is a straightforward write in some ways. It's this happened and we flashback to that, and it's got kind of a structure in the middle where it's a big flashback, but I don't think people get lost in it.'[13]

Prologue

The idea of 'nature' is introduced in the extended epigraph describing the Okotoks Erratic. But the language employed by Laveau-Harvie broadens the meaning to the human world. Protruding from 'a landscape of uncommon beauty', the Okotoks Erratic 'dominates', but is also, like the author's mother, 'isolated', 'roped off' because although it has fallen 'in on itself'; it is a 'danger to anyone trespassing'. This metaphor pervades the memoir, a bleak yet heartrending rendition of a woman so dangerous to those closest to her that she, too, must be 'roped off'. This description also hints at the suffering the mother undergoes; she, too, has collapsed in on herself. Ironically, it is the literal collapse and crumbling of her hip that saves her husband, and to an extent, negates her power over those who 'trespass'.

Suggested classroom activities and discussion points

- An epigraph is used by authors to strike the 'key note', establish the tone and concerns of the book to follow. How does this long epigraph / prologue do this? In your own creative writing, construct an epigraph or prologue to introduce your concerns.
- Students could construct a table documenting the metaphor of the Okotok Erratic and how it relates to the author's mother.
- If we cannot blame the Rock for anything—it is just there—does it follow that the mother, too, is merely an oddity of nature, who cannot be held responsible?
- Can we blame anyone for the horrors of the effects of this woman on her family? Is 'blame' even relevant?

The prologue, complemented by the memoir's final pages, frames the text, and creates a focus on the title and its significance. It offers us the geological description and history of the Erratic, while the Blackfoot myth of Napi and the Rock (the Okotok) at the end of the text **explains** the Erratic, what it **means**.

13 https://thegarretpodcast.com/vicki laveau harvie/

27 Chapters: Six years of visits to Canada, with incidents from the past intruding

The division of the memoir into 27 chapters, each of them with divisions reflecting Laveau-Harvie's experiences during her visits, and the memories of her family experiences which these evoke, gives shape to the text, ordering the flow of the free associative process of the narrator's mind. A first impression might be of formlessness, a stream of consciousness random combination of thoughts, showing 'the inner workings of ... [Vicki Laveau-Harvie's] mind in all its complexity'.[14] The 'jumbled up images and ... memories' combine with an underlying rigorous structuring complexity'.[15] Another trait of stream of consciousness writing utilised in *The Erratics* is the use of multiple voices, non-chronological narration, plus the concentrated use of symbols and allusions.

- **The episodic nature of the structure**

  Each chapter is composed of episodes, a mixture of vignettes from the present experiences intruded upon by flashes from the past. Thus, the image of a quilt might help to describe the author's structural approach—each brief section is vivid, often bizarre and disturbing, and contributes to the overall picture which Laveau-Harvie is trying to construct.

- **Central flashback to a three-day visit**

  Near the centre of the book, from Chapter 10 to the end of Chapter 16, is the extended flashback to Laveau-Harvie's spur of the moment visit to Canada a year and a half before the broken hip. The narration signals this with 'Here we are then, in the back story' (p. 77), marking the division of time for the reader, and inviting us to consider the way she is telling the story. As she flies from Calgary to Vancouver after 'the three-day fiasco visit to my parents' (p. 118), the story from the past that edges into her consciousness, prompted by musing about the differences between the sisters, is of the mother cutting off her elder daughter's hair. The chapter ends with the exhortation, 'Be glad if you forget.' (p. 123) In a book confronting in its shocking depiction of the effects of such an upbringing, this central section provides some of the most distressing passages.

- **Chapter 27: a sense of closure?**

  Like the other chapters, the final one is also fragmented; it has three parts. It opens with the news of the mother's death, completing the framing device begun in the prologue, and attains some kind of reconciliation, resolution and restoration that has been absent in the rest of the memoir. The final image is of the mother's spirit and Napi sitting on the Okotok. Can we interpret this as a benign and 'happy' ending? Do Napi's words, 'It's about not taking back what you have given.' (p. 216), have relevance to the daughters, also?

14 John Smart, *Modernism and After: English Literature 1910 1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22.
15 Ibid. p. 124

Perspective on the text

Although Vicki Laveau-Harvie has not lived in Canada for many years, her book grew out of her Canadian experiences, and is structured around a six year period when she made several trips to Canada from her home in Australia each year. When considering Canadian literature, the two most discussed theoretical approaches are those offered by Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood.

Frye[16] writes of the individual in Canadian literature developing what he calls 'a garrison mentality', the only way to assert human values against the enormity and alien quality of a vast and unfamiliar natural environment. He argues that the values clung to in the face of such uncontrollable and seemingly endless landscape are those that give the individual the reassurance of the semblance of control. The early settlers marked their progress into the new land by a series of forts or garrisons, safe places which would shelter them, and which they could defend.[17] These garrisons were, by definition, isolated from each other. It is easy to see Laveau-Harvie's parents' house as epitomising the garrison mentality. Set amongst awe-inspiring natural beauty, yet separate from it; locked and bolted against the threat of the outside world; crammed with 'provisions' in a parody of preparing for winter. Laveau-Harvie's mother does not preserve or pickle; in fact, the family's land does not produce any crop; there is a disconnect from the natural world. Her wardrobes are full of fur coats (pp. 45-6), symbols of wealth and exploitation. The lawns are symbols of artifice, of the taming, even destruction of the wilderness, of which the Okotoks Erratic is a reminder. The author tells the story of how she decided on the title[18]: on one of her visits to her parents, she was driving through the Rocky Mountain foothills, and saw a sign saying 'Visit the Okotoks Erratic' and she thought, 'I am'.

The extended metaphor of the Erratics is one of the unifying strands running through the memoir. The most obvious identification we make is that between the Rock and the mother. The prologue sets this up for us: they are both 'unsafe', 'dominates', 'roped off and isolated', a 'danger'. Synonyms for 'erratic'—such as the following list: *unpredictable, inconsistent, changeable, variable, inconstant, irregular, fitful, unstable, turbulent, unsettled, changing, varying, fluctuating, mutable, unreliable, undependable, volatile, spasmodic, mercurial, capricious, fickle, temperamental, moody*—are useful when writing about the book and the author's mother, but are terrifying when applied to the role of mothering. Structurally, the prologue prepares us for linking the Erratics with the mother, and the rock formation is not mentioned again until the end of the book. Its presence, however, cannot be forgotten.

In her *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood built on Northrop Frye's theory of the garrison mentality, arguing that survival is the dominant theme of Canadian literature, in the way that the island and the frontier are dominant images in the literatures of Great Britain and the USA. She further argues that the central character of Canadian literature is the victim. Neither Frye's nor Atwood's ideas are universally popular, but each offers an interesting window through which to view *The Erratics*. To an extent, all the major characters in *The Erratics* are victims, and it is possible to argue that the mother suffers more than the others. Atwood develops the 'basic victim positions', a hypothesis that allows her 'to deal with all kinds of power relationships that move easily from political and social violence to gender relationships.'[19]

- Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.
- Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim (but attribute it to a powerful force beyond human control such as fate, history, God, or biology).
- Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.
- Position Four: To be a creative non-victim.[20]

Atwood was critical of the effect of colonialism on Canadian literature, something we see in the virtual absence of Native Americans in Laveau-Harvie's parents' consciousnesses. The book's final pages are powerful, as a mood of acceptance and peace is evoked, with a sense that the mother and what she represents is reconciled with the landscape, its original inhabitants and perhaps with her daughters.

A feminist point of view could interpret the mother's behaviour as the result of the entrenched inequalities

16 N. Frye, 'Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada,' in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi. 1971).
17 Ibid.
18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBfDW3SeIkQ
19 P. Goetsch, 'Margaret Atwood: A Canadian Nationalist,' in *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, ed. Reingard M. Nischik (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 173.
20 Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), 36 38.

arising from a patriarchal system which offers few of its members fulfilment. Although her conduct, especially the treatment of others, fits the profile of extreme narcissistic personality disorder, we can also see her as an 'unruly woman', one who refuses the stereotype of feminine passivity, acceptance and silence. Her frustrations can be seen as the symptoms of disempowerment. Trapped in the nuclear family, and the house which cages this family, she turns on the only people over whom she has agency—her husband and daughters. Examples which can illustrate this way of reading the text are Vicki's first year at college, when her mother enrols in the same course, the parodies of motherhood and feminine suffering she assumes in her many 'fabulations' as Laveau-Harvie calls her stories, the lies and stories providing an outlet for her frustrated creativity. Her gambling and enthusiastic embracing of mail-order scams can be interpreted as a way of attracting attention; one of the descriptions of this 'squandering' (p. 114) is juxtaposed with the father's 'kind of grudging pride in him at the sight of his wife spending big, just because she could' (p. 113), reducing her to a kind of status symbol, an emblem of his own 'success'.

There is no doubt that the mother is intelligent. Laveau-Harvie's description of her 'reading Isabel Allende in the original Spanish' demonstrates this; that 'she has always wished it to be known that she reads everything of importance in all the major European languages' (p. 95) suggests a desperate need for validation.

A psychoanalytical interpretation of *The Erratics* could argue that the Electra complex, a term coined by Jung, and based on Freud's work, explains the daughters' determination to separate their father from their mother. However, this once again ignores the fact of the mother's mental illness, as well as the evidence that she was slowly starving her husband. The reversal of roles comes with decrepitude and aging, though the horror with which Laveau-Harvie observes her sister showering the father, unaware of the 'ludicrous ... situation ... his man gear dangling above my sister's head' (p. 166) is comical, and latently potent with Freudian implications. Students could also consider Freud's ideas on memory; subjective and often unconscious, memory creates the individual.

However, when reading *The Erratics*, we are struck by the extent to which Laveau-Harvie and her sister have suffered, the extent to which they have been deprived of the stability, safety and unconditional love a family should provide. 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad,[21]' wrote poet Philip Larkin, one of the author's favourite poets. Vicki Laveau-Harvie's *The Erratics* seems to illustrate Larkin's line perfectly, the author's family resembling a war zone rather than a nurturing haven.

Suggested classroom activities

- Students should collect examples of how Laveau-Harvie describes her childhood, noting the use of the language of warfare, eg. 'a moving target' (p. 129).
- How would we expect such a childhood to affect a person?
- Can we find evidence of damage in the sisters? Students could look at references to Vicki's own children, at her need to live on continents that are not the Americas, at the sister and the life she has built.
- The father: is he a victim or an enabler? Where do our sympathies lie? Why?
- To what extent is Laveau-Harvie an unreliable narrator?

21 'This Be The Verse' from Phillip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

Characters

The narrator—Vicki Laveau-Harvie

The author is the only character whose name the reader knows. As a result, the spotlight is trained on familial relationships. Denied the individuality that comes with one's name, the major characters are defined in terms of their blood connections. However, the enormous gaps between these members of the same family show the extent of trauma implicit in such connections. The further gap between the concepts and roles of 'sister', 'mother', 'father' and the reality presented to us in the memoir forces us to consider the tension between the self and the parts we are expected to fulfil.

A further effect of not naming characters is that we focus on the issues and ideas that the author is exploring. The intricate nature of the book's structure precludes any simplistic 'black and white' points of view. Although the voice we hear is Laveau-Harvie's voice, often she recounts incidents that are not flattering to her, and she seems to make many efforts to be fair to other characters. She is especially meticulous in writing about her sister, and acknowledging their different characters and opinions, yet does not deviate from what she must do to ensure her own survival.

The blunt brutality of the language employed by the writer when she is referring to her mother often jars, as it suggests a hardness of heart. Yet it becomes clear that describing her as 'crazy', 'mad as a meat-axe', is a coping mechanism, helping her to distance herself from the unbearable pain of both past and present. The extent to which Laveau-Harvie's sense of self and sanity is hard-won is suggested when she lets the protective layer of humour fall. 'Scratch me and you get grief', she says; scratch the sister and 'you'll get rage, a geyser of it.' (p. 35) Consistently, the author employs language of the Albertan environment to portray emotion, such as here, alluding to the oil which has been extracted from the land, and which is the basis of the father's wealth. The simmering release of the sister's anger is linked to the potential violence of the oil 'plumes … black and viscous' (p. 35).

Suggested classroom activities

- Students should draw on the memoir to collect as many words and phrases as possible to describe Laveau-Harvie. For instance, it is possible to describe her as caring, but also as coldly determined to survive by living elsewhere, in spite of being 'gnawed by guilt' (p. 136).
- For Vicki Laveau-Harvie, what does 'survival' mean? The danger posed by even being back in her parents' house is that of annihilation; she feels 'transparent, like a wonton wrapper' (p. 45). In Vancouvour after leaving Okotok, she 'walk[s] like an invalid' (p. 63).
- Discussion might bring up disagreement in students' assessments of the author. Is she forgiving, almost saintlike, or inhumanly unforgiving? Or more complex and qualified? Find five examples to justify your choice of words.
- Keep evaluating the narrator. How hard is she on herself? Is she irrevocably damaged?

The sister

Throughout the memoir, Vicki Laveau-Harvie emphasises the differences between herself and her sister. Unlike the vivid word portraits the memoir contains of the mother, we are not given physical descriptions of the sisters, apart from being told they are often mistaken for each other. We are, however, given insight into their personalities, and into their 'moral, ethical and practical' value systems.

The sister's emotions are more overtly displayed than Laveau-Harvie's. 'My sister cries out from the heart … Do I look dead?' (p. 3). If the sisters' childhood and young womanhood has been a war waged on them by their mother, literal, and emotional survival has been hard won. At times being 'not dead' (pp. 103, 130) is a major achievement, but 'not dead' is not a description of healthy, not to mention, happy life. Here, Laveau-Harvie takes refuge in sardonic humour—'I don't think she is looking too good'—to reduce the situation and feelings to manageable proportions.

The authorial decision not to give her characters names pervades the memoir. Names represent identity, individuality and autonomy as distinct from roles and functions, and both Laveau-Harvie and her sister are clearly aware of this, seen in the fact that 'my sister changed what we were allowed to call her' (p. 23), in order not to be 'cast back into the black chasms of before'. The always-present sibling competition is indicated through her only having 'two names' (p. 17) missing out on the writer's three; that these names are those of other people—the mother, 'my father's young sister, dead at five' (p. 17)—suggests the extent to which these daughters are valued only in terms of other people.

The sister's joy at the mother's diagnosis of incompetence is very different from Vicki's grief. Through the phone come sounds of 'jubilant crowing. And singing … organising a party.' (p. 157). Readers can consider whether the author's grief

is a more mature and thoughtful response, or that we can understand the sister's exhilaration in a life which pain and impotence have dominated.

The extent of the emotional devastation experienced by Laveau-Harvie is seen in the blacking out, the forgetting of much of her past; but her sister has not done this—'she feels the blows of the past continuously in her present.' (p. 120). In a sense, she is more emotional, less restrained, less able to distance herself from pain and feeling; examples of this include the incident when she faints in the plane, her serious illness that could be a result of the traumatic cleaning out of the family home, her unrealistic suggestion that she and her partner will move to live close by the parents. She has no children, is clearly idealistic—she is 'the other one', the one who searched for enlightenment in an ashram, who does good works. She and her partner have a supportive relationship and a healthy circle of friends, but there is a subtle suggestion by Laveau-Harvie that their impressive portfolio of property and wealth has its origins in the excessive valuing of money which so defined their parents.

In the final chapter, Laveau-Harvie draws the chasm between the sisters; it has been made clear throughout the memoir that geography, separation, even the shared family experiences have created a gap between them which cannot be fully bridged. Nowhere is this more obvious than here, as they apply their individual value systems to the dilemma of whether to inform their father of his wife's death. Hampered by her awareness that it is her sister who is in Canada, and is taking on most of the responsibility, also feeling 'differently' about Mum's story now that the last page has been written' (p. 211), the author argues that he must be told.

Her arguments include:

- To withhold their father's mail is illegal.
- The daughters do not have the right to decide that they 'know best'.
- If they wait till he asks about his wife, he'll never find out that she is dead.
- If someone else tells him, his daughters will lose his trust.
- The sister's analogy between the mother's death and repairing a coat is false.
- It will bring 'closure'.

On the other hand, the sister contends:

- He doesn't need to know.
- If he asks for news of his wife, she will tell him anything he wants to know.
- It would upset and confuse him; 'He might think you died.' (p. 210).
- No-one will know, and no-one will tell him, as his mail is being held for her to read.
- He trusts her to repair his coat, so he would trust her to decide this.

Which sister is right, morally?

The mother

'Your mother's extreme narcissistic personality disorder lies at the heart of your memoir *The Erratics*. How would a psychiatrist explain her behaviour?

> These are people who have a huge sense of entitlement and no empathy for others whatsoever. But they're often hugely charismatic. They can see where the faults in people are and they exploit them. I can name one or two world figures ... They believe they have a right to everything and when they don't get it, there's a violent reaction.'[22]

Without a name, we can only describe this woman in terms of her role as mother (rarely as a wife) and in this role she does a staggering amount of damage. The author has clearly made a very deliberate decision not to name her characters, yet she is equally clearly aware of the degree to which our names indicate our identities. Not only is the readers' attention directed towards the characters' roles in the family, but the elemental battle for domination is heightened. The mother's and elder daughter's first names are the same, so that they are mistaken for the same person when both enrol in the same college course[23]. This vicarious intrusion into another life and identity comes across as a sort of identity theft by the mother, and seems to be the trigger for the daughter's leaving Canada permanently. Laveau-Harvie has a complex response to her experiences and memories, with the mere facts she recounts being staggeringly heinous. Yet in linking her mother to Alberta's climate 'Nothing personal', she in some way acknowledges that the mother is only as guilty as the Okotok Erratic is guilty of its mere existence. Is she equating 'In winter the cold will kill

22 Cathy Osmond, 'Q&A: Vicki Laveau Harvie, author, 75,' *The Australian Magazine*, July 13, 2019, 12:00 a.m., https://www.theaustralian.com.au/weekend australian magazine/qa vicki laveauharvie author 75/news story/fbe090a7f9d6aa129eb8ab78a16a9a8f

23 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBfDW3SeIkQ

you.' (p. 2) with the mother's devious manipulation that forces her husband and daughter into the deadly drive to Shawnessy, a kind of attempted murder?

The first physical description of the mother—'gaunt ... black fringe and bobbed hair ... wearing a hospital gown and a pair of fuchsia boxer shorts.' (p. 2)—is a preparation for the nightmarish bizarre quality of her behaviour and its effect on other people. Largely under a degree of control for the 'present' sections of the memoir, the fear she inspires in the author is almost palpable, and the violence of her entire life, an elemental, destructively energetic force.

- Students could collect all the facts about and descriptions of the mother, and build an 'identikit' portrait of her. This could form the basis of a creative piece such as an obituary.

As suggested in the earlier **Perspective on the text**, a feminist reading of the mother could be relevant, but we cannot ignore her mental illness. However, many of her 'fabulations' concern daughters: lost ones, dead ones, fugitive ones. When a character is so destructive of those she should love, when her disregard of others is so total, it is difficult to evince sympathy, yet the seemingly endless stories about daughters suggest an obsession about mothers and daughters. In one interview, Laveau-Harvie makes the chilling comment that her mother's behaviour was 'nothing personal'[24]; her illness precluded her being able to distinguish her daughter from her own psyche.

The mother's peaceful death is in stark contrast to her life: 'If anyone was going to rage against the dying of the light, I would have put my money on her.' Laveau-Harvie writes (p. 210).[25]

The father

Vicki Laveau-Harvie summarises this man's marriage: 'seven decades ... made his life hell and nearly ruined him, as well as giving him, we hope, the happiest moments of his life' (p. 212).

Throughout the memoir, the father is described from without, mainly through the eyes of his elder daughter. The extent of her attachment to him is often only hinted at, though the metaphor of her 'heart crack[ing]' (p. 32) at the memory of this starved old man being 'once tall and fit and strong' in a 'Hallmark moment' that almost enacts her pain. The 'Hallmark' allusion, though, suggests the illusory aspect of this rare happy memory, if not the shallow fakery that comes with greetings cards.

His life has seemed the fulfilment of the Canadian Dream, and is described in terms of the successes and failures of this aspiration. The once gregarious man has only one friend remaining, and has acceded to his wife's disowning of their daughters, giving a man who is a virtual stranger to the daughters, legal power over their parents' affairs. He has become as isolated and helpless as the Okotok.

Consider the following, providing evidence from the book to illustrate the accuracy of the statements:

- He loved his wife so much that he could not deny her anything, either materially, or emotionally.
- He was passive, lacking insight, refusing to assume responsibility and oppose his wife.
- He failed his daughters because he put himself and his wife first.
- He had no idea of how culpable he was.
- He thought he had been a good father.
- He should never have had children.
- It would have been different if he had had sons.
- He and his wife had given the daughters everything that money can buy; they were good parents.
- He suffers from Stockholm Syndrome. (p. 8)

24 Ibid.
25 Poem by Dylan Thomas, 'Do not go gentle into that good night'.

The carer

'She is red-haired and childless, married, with animals.' (p. 22)

One of the major characteristics of this book is the complexity, in fact, the erratic aspect of character. This former downhill skier is dependable and practical, exhibiting a wry sense of humour as she treats the refrigerator as an exploratory exercise. She is superior to the 'delusional, kleptomaniac, serial killer, drug addled bunch we've had' (p. 175). But this 'rock' (p. 146) ultimately shows another facet of her personality, when she attempts to 'look after him from now on' (p. 174), defending him against the 'harpies', two of whom are his employers.

This incident reminds us of the world in which this family lives, a world full of people who are not successful, and who seem to be prowling on the outskirts of society, waiting to prey on others, or just plain unhappy and needy. The possession of money almost acts as a target, and the ability to pay for domestic help and care for the father and his house does not solve all the sisters' problems.

Other characters

Just as we have a sense of marginalised fringe-dwellers ready to pounce on undefended property, we cannot ignore others, often the family's neighbours, who are innately good, generous and helpful, who are 'jaw-droppingly magnanimous' (p. 55) in spite of a history of alarming encounters with the mother which has led them to behave 'like skittish horses' when they visit the family home, displaying forgiveness and kindness. Consistently, in the past, the mother has seen such attitudes as offering the means for manipulation and confrontation, exploiting the very qualities we admire. The comical episode of the old friend who rings Laveau-Harvie to commiserate with her at her mother's 'death', shows the almost childish way the mother creates fictions to get what she wants. But this woman is crying, her decency makes her vulnerable. In the last chapter, the women who inadvertently force the sister to tell her father of his wife's death, are symbols of connected, caring neighbourliness (p. 212).

Issues and themes

In her acceptance speech for the 2019 Stella Prize, Vicki Laveau-Harvie said, of her projected next piece of writing, that it would wrestle 'with questions of how we know who we are, what makes us who we are, and why we sometimes turn our backs on what went before us. How we define a meaningful life, and what compromise and grief we are willing to endure to live that life.'[26] These words provide readers of *The Erratics* with a guide to understanding what the text is concerned with.

Family, and nature versus nurture

Many of Laveau-Harvie's authorial concerns have been established by the end of the memoir's first two chapters. She uses her own immediate family experiences to explore the very concept of the family unit. Readers are left with serious doubts about glib assumptions portraying families as nurturing, loving and safe places. The nuclear family in *The Erratics* resembles a war zone; the space is contested on every level. Much of the sisters' childhood reads like a battle for survival, and the enemy is their mother. Even the woman's handwriting is described as 'all confident pointed flourishes, a martial art weapons script.' (p.73) Tolstoy's words from Anna Karenina—'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'—seems especially relevant.

The author places her family both as part of the context of its social and physical environment, and at the same time, emphasises the extent to which, impelled by the mother's mental illness and ferocious energy, the family is isolated. An example of this can be found in the story of the Okotoks librarian who is 'commandeer[ed]' to drive the mother to the mall. This is one of many instances of this woman taking advantage of the kindness and neighbourliness of others. The humour with which the nonagenarian's attack on her benefactor is described is lacking from Laveau-Harvie's memory of the hair cut. We can laugh at the librarian 'holding her head and sliding behind mannequins and floral displays' (p. 112), but the absence of memory of what was done to the pre-teen narrator suggests pain that cannot be accommodated. It is her adult imagination that provides a description, once again in the language of aggression and violence (p. 122)—'grabs ... hisses ... shiny and sabre-sharp ... cold metal'.

26 https://thestellaprize.com.au/2019/04/vicki laveau harvies 2019 stella prize acceptance speech/

The writer's son addresses a major idea in the book, when he tells his mother, 'if nurture calls the shots, logically, you should be a serial killer ... You're a good person.' (p. 71) It is worth discussing what we mean when we describe a person as 'good'. The fact that these words come from the author's son suggests that there has been no cycle of repetitive familial destruction. There are points in the memoir when Laveau-Harvie clearly is torn between choices, and each time chooses what will enable her to survive. The seemingly cold-hearted humour throughout much of the book could offend some readers, but functions as a means of dealing with unimaginable pain and horror.

With Laveau-Harvie and her sister steadfastly both caring for their father and ensuring that their mother never comes home, comes the element of mental illness. If the mother cannot be blamed, cannot be seen as evil, because she is ill, then what do we make of the father? Starved and confused when we first meet him, he appears to be a victim of a virulent woman. But he has been complicit; even the turning off of his hearing aids in his latter years can be seen as a refusal to commit to taking responsibility. Laveau-Harvie has spoken of being the adult in the room when she was four years old, and the anecdotes about the sisters being left home alone as tiny children endorse this.

In the middle pages of *The Erratics*, Laveau-Harvie's uncle and his wife offer us a portrait of an ordinary family, but the value placed on it is emphasised by the choice of language—'We're like the king and queen' (p. 86) says the uncle, a description repeated by the narrator, linking the image with 'love and problems, success and loss ... a well-worn life fully lived'. The chasm between the values evoked here, and the values associated with Laveau-Harvie's parents' 'family life' is horrendous. 'My uncle has me by the hand' demonstrates the gentleness and kindness seemingly never offered by her own parents. The generosity, reticence and love exhibited by the aunt and uncle also gives their opinions weight and validity, perhaps enabling some measure of reassurance and healing for the author and her sister.

Time and time again, members of the outside world are fooled and manipulated by the writer's mother. Even Canada's famed Mounted Police are recruited by her. The wry humour of 'we sent in the cavalry' helps distance the pain two grown women still experience when attacked by their own parents. The sister's need for reassurance suggests the damage wrought on her. When she telephones her uncle, the response of this family member 'with whom we had no contact for years' (p. 79), is immediate and certain. Not only is she not 'venal and horrible', he says, but 'Your parents, however, that fits like a glove.' This foreshadows the later scene when the uncle reluctantly delivers Laveau-Harvie to her parents' house, and her mother, after eighteen years, 'looks through me.' (p. 89).

The book offers many examples of ways in which the author's family falls short of the ideal. Students could list as many of these instances as possible, discussing possible effects. They could also analyse Laveau-Harvie's reactions, and evaluate how judgemental, or fair, she seems about her parents.

The Canadian Dream

A 2017 survey[27] asked Canadians what the Canadian Dream means to them. There is a commonality through the answers: appreciation, care for and oneness with the land; tolerance, acceptance and inclusiveness; ability 'to create everything our hearts desire'; opportunity 'to provide for one's family and to make a comfortable life'; making a better place for everyone.

Many students will be familiar with the American Dream, often relevant when reading texts, and when studying history. Enshrined in the US Declaration of Independence is the essence of the Dream, guaranteeing citizens 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. The confusion found in the assumption that if one works hard, one will be successful—that is, rich, and thus, happy—is evident. A panoramic study of the USA in 2020 would find it difficult to see the success of these assumptions. The Canadian Dream is very similar to that of the USA, also confusing the accumulation of material possessions with the attainment of happiness. The major difference is in the articulation of the importance of the environment. The memoir evokes the beauty of the Albertan landscape, in its danger and transcendent splendour, but we also see the despoiling of this. The highways are described as lethal, carving straight through the curves of the terrain bringing the monstrous roar to the prairies.

The Erratics is full of allusions—to literature, popular culture, history and geography. Early in the book, Laveau-Harvie refers to 'the Hotel California' (p. 5) as she introduces readers to her parents' house. The reference is to The Eagles' song of that name, described

27 https://www.buzzfeed.com/chevroletcanada/we asked canadians what the canadian dream means to them

by Don Henley, co-writer and Eagle[28] as 'basically a song about the dark underbelly of the American dream and about excess in America.' One of the most compelling images of this 'excess', and of the tension created by the confusion between money, success and happiness in *The Erratics* is of 'my father, in the barn ... sitting on one of his selection of ride-on mowers' (p. 77). Drawing on the famous painting of the American Gothic[29], a painting often interpreted as conveying the best of pioneer spirit and values, Laveau-Harvie creates 'an image of ... Prairie Gothic'. The expansive lushness of the cultivated, expensive lawns is achieved by the wastefulness of buying 'a new one as soon as anything went wrong'. This, and many other examples, undercut the author's assertion that 'My parents live in paradise' (p. 4). It is, indeed, paradise lost. The idea of the gothic, apparently referring to the style of house in the 1930 American Gothic, suggests the hidden horrors in the parents' home. There are many gothic elements in this book; it does, indeed, relate 'to the darker side of human existence, encompassing insanity, fear, cruelty, violence ...'[30]

Almost immediately after her claim that 'my parents live in paradise', the Hotel California allusion qualifies this vision. Many settlers of the Americas thought they were regaining paradise, that in the untouched wilderness they could recreate the Garden of Eden. However, as 'civilisation' spread, so often did the destruction of the landscape, the pristine wilderness, and the disconnect between human beings and their natural surroundings. In general, throughout the book, we do gain a sense of a caring and benign society, and there are many examples of neighbourliness. However, Laveau-Harvie's parents seem to lack these qualities. They are 'transplants' (p. 4), do not preserve their harvests in tune with the seasons. Their house is described tellingly—'fortress', 'windowless library', 'bomb shelter', summed up by 'not a welcoming place' (p. 5).

The author's father has derived his wealth from oil, from the land itself, yet it is presented as an exploitative relationship; from the despoiled land, seemingly endless riches flow, to be dissipated and wasted by a couple who appear to have no connection to their landscape at all.

Almost all the segments of this memoir link the writer's parents with their possessions. The house itself, a bunker to hunker down in against the outside world, ages as its owners age. Parts of it are held together with bandaids (p. 94) suggesting it is in some way more than a mere physical building. Whilst the generosity and kindness of neighbours is a constant, Laveau-Harvie evokes a sense of either hostile or predatory people on the lookout for vulnerabilities. The attempted robbery when her father is home alone on Christmas night is explained through 'You reap what you sow' (p. 67), the break-in 'a good idea' because of her mother's 'broadcast to all of Southern Alberta that they were richer than the House of Rothschild'. This logic is seen again when the sisters have an estate sale of the house's contents, to avoid the depredations of robbers and squatters. The sense of the presence in this conservative Albertan society of the 'have nots', those who have been failed by the Canadian Dream, or to whom it has never applied, and of the waste represented by the accumulation of mindless spending by the parents, is chilling; we have already had a glimpse of those whose lives have not been successful, who are barely scraping a living, and for whom the concept of happiness is irrelevant, in the descriptions of the carers hired for the father. The magnitude of the parents' voracious acquisitive wave of buying is seen in the 17 page long catalogue laying out 'my parents' entire life' (p. 181). There is desolation as Laveau-Harvie describes the house, finally 'with doors wide open', as the 'vultures' 'pick through the remains' (p. 183). What, after all, has been achieved? What are they left with?

The father's favourite conversation topic in his later life in Pacific Peace begins with 'Do you know how much I'm worth? (p. 190). His first reaction to his enjoyment of living there is to think of buying 'the whole complex' (p. 189). He spurns the company of the other residents of the 'golden-years operation', in favour of Gerta, who 'fills a void for Dad, the empty space reserved for a carping deluded woman who will endlessly remind him to be wary of everyone around him.' (p. 189). What does this suggest about his values?

Consistently throughout this memoir, Laveau-Harvie emphasises the differences between the sisters, and the extent to which their parents have affected and damaged them, and their sense of themselves, is a continual thread. This gap is clear in their discussion of 'working class', the sister arguing that she and her suburb in Vancouver are working class, defined by 'having a job' (p. 186). The author insists that 'we

28 https://www.songfacts.com/facts/eagles/hotel california
29 https://www.artic.edu/artworks/6565/american gothic
30 K. Berndt, 'The Ordinary Terrors of Survival: Alice Munro and the Canadian Gothic,' in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 370 (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2015): http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1100118829/LitRC?u=lond95336&sid=LitRC&xid=d1fb0715

have sprung desperately from a violently aspirational upper-middle-class background, and that I see that as part of the greater malaise we live with.' While one sister is concerned with amassing possessions—'impressive wall of properties owned and managed by my sister and her partner' (p. 185)—the other has lived a very different life in very different countries and is seemingly able to separate herself from the drive to 'own' as much as possible, and is more analytical.

How is 'class' defined? Can we discern Laveau-Harvie's attitude to money and the Canadian Dream through the language chosen, such as 'desperately', 'violently', 'malaise'? Is the sister still in thrall to the values of her parents, unlike the writer?

Old age

The central fact providing the impetus for this memoir is Laveau-Harvie's parents' ageing. The mother's broken hip and the father's debilitation make them dependent and deprive them of autonomy, although it can be argued that the father's control over his life has been tenuous for many years. What might seem remarkable to some readers is that the sisters do not hesitate to come to their parents' aid; nor will they compromise the care given to them. Determined not to allow the mother to return home, because she will 'kill' her husband, Laveau-Harvie also cannot allow her to be sent to a dementia unit in Vulcan, 'a town named for the god of fire and metalwork and forges ... when she doesn't have dementia.' (p. 151). At times during the book, the writer can sound hard and heartless, yet she operates according to a set of values that cannot accommodate such a fate for her mother.

The story of Peabody the peacock parallels the predicament of Laveau-Harvie's parents, whom she is trying to prevent from 'doing a Peabody' (p. 74). Difficult, 'stroppy and dumped on the Okotoks property', Peabody cannot take the lonely winters in the barn. He escapes to 'a bare branch where no-one could reach him' and 'by morning was frozen on the bough.' (p. 75). Laveau-Harvie suggests that this is what society does to its elderly.

The Albertan doctors do not escape criticism. Readers could ask how a woman so clearly mentally ill as the mother could have escaped treatment for so long. Laveau-Harvie finds it difficult to make contact with her mother's doctor, who seems to think he is reassuring her when he 'rambles on ... about how old people with broken hips generally don't see out the year' (p. 145). This is the same doctor who tells the author 'stories about how other families dealt with their troublesome parents ... Like Peabody the Peacock's original owner had done when he dumped him with my father.' (p. 134).

The lack of value society places on the old is epitomised by the medical profession. The irony is that the two disowned daughters will not accept this devaluing of their parents' lives. The specialists are unwilling to commit themselves, while many of the nurses are willing prey for the mother, often seduced by her stories of riches. The book makes it clear that this family is able to pay whatever is needed for the parents' care; we can only imagine what it is like to be poor and old. Laveau-Harvie's conviction that her father must be afforded dignity, and dissatisfaction with the way the elderly are disregarded, are constant concerns in the book; her father's worry 'that something has happened to his body' (p. 206) brings home some insight into what it is like to age.

Mental illness and the effect on other family members

The author's mother is in her mid-nineties when she is diagnosed as mentally incompetent. Until then, according to the memoir, she has been a violently malignant presence in her family as well as in her community.

Language and style

Humour

Although we could assume that the subject matter of *The Erratics* is unlikely to be seen as funny, this text contains a great deal of black humour. We can probably all remember laughing at a time of misery or loss, not because we were callous, but because it was a means to bear suffering, to deal with something unbearable. As Abraham Lincoln said, 'I laugh because I must not cry...'. Laveau-Harvie explained, '... even when a situation looks really really dire, there are funny things or touching things ... things that are a little bit redeeming that allow you to hang on until you get a little bit out of the white water.'[31]

- Black humour, also called black comedy, [is] writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that [can often] underscore the senselessness or futility of life.[32] One of the earliest instances of this in *The Erratics* is found in the first chapter, setting a pattern of Laveau-Harvie using seemingly insensitive jokes as an element of protecting herself from the horror of events that are overwhelmingly confronting. The first shock comes when 'MMA', given its own line on page 1, thus an expectation of some authority as a professional term, is undercut by the explanatory 'Mad as a meat-axe'. The savagery of this phrase is jarring in the context of the sisters' mother's hospital bed, yet in this and other instances it is the only way they can deal with their situation.
- Three pages in, she moves back a little in time to describe the conversation with two health workers, a nurse and the physio. Each has been given a different story of the patient's, their mother's, family, and each has, perhaps gullibly, accepted what she has been told as fact. The comedy as the sisters each claims to be the dead daughter, and the narrator remarks that she 'can't speak for the [seventeen] others' recurs throughout the book, seemingly heartless humour used to deal with what cannot be accommodated, understood or defeated.

Time and tenses

The section on **Structure of the text** investigates how Laveau-Harvie has organised and ordered her memoir. The use of flashbacks engendered by the present events suggests the relationship between past and present, between early experiences and the mature identity.

The sections of the text describing the events of the six years beginning with the mother breaking her hip are written in the present tense, creating a vivid immediacy. The intrusive episodes from the past are, obviously, written in the past tense; the effect of this is to distance them to an extent, though they cannot be ignored; even the author's amnesia is a survival strategy and an indication of the extent of the trauma. Laveau-Harvie does not use conventional punctuation for dialogue; the effect of this choice may be to add to the flow of a stream of consciousness evocation of memory, and perhaps to suggest the difficulty the characters have in communicating in a powerful, efficacious way.

Symbolism, metaphors and similes

Laveau-Harvie's writing is arresting, not merely because of the bizarre quality of her subject matter, but also because of the unconventional and fresh way she describes her experiences.

- Each student could pick a chapter, and find and analyse all the imagery, categorising it into metaphors and similes. This is good preparation for a creative response.

The author uses no stale clichés, her imagery is confronting, quirky, fresh and evocative, its surface heartless humour often masking sharp pain. The similes of 'like an organ escaping an incision, like a balloon filled with acid ... bursts on impact, burning holes in their spouses' clothing' (p. 19) become metaphors, building in physical impact, the verbs violent and destructive. It is possible to find such vibrant and arresting imagery on almost every page.

31 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBfDW3SeIkQ
32 https://www.britannica.com/topic/black humor

Story-telling, stories and myths – 'a valid way to tell the story'[33]

As mentioned in relation to the text's structure, *The Erratics* comprises many different vignettes, episodes, memories, experiences, combined and ordered to create a whole.

In her Stella acceptance speech, Laveau-Harvie tells a story about reading a story when she was young. An historical romance, it was about a young girl, beautiful and talented who 'wants to study abroad, to practise and perform ... She sings her heart out' with her eyes shut to the stunning grandeur of the prairies, and does not hear a young man approach. The result? '[H]er singing will become restricted now to lullabies for calming fretful babies, and hymns in church, and you probably feel as bad about that as I do.'[34] This story helps to understand the story and the lost promise of the ex-downhill skier.

The fluidity of the movement through time and place, reminiscent of modernist stream of consciousness writing, is punctuated by signs and patterns. One of these signs or structural markers is laid down at the start of Chapter 17 when the writer attempts to find an image to convey the 'shape' of her story, describing the 'pivot point' in some driveways in Hong Kong (p. 125). The start of this section is bookended by the account of New Year's Eve in Hong Kong, where Laveau-Harvie's son tells her she is a 'good person' (p. 71); this acts as a talisman to sustain her. Laveau-Harvie uses various images to remind us of the constructed nature of narrative, and to offer a pattern of guidance for the reader. Hong Kong is associated with colour and light, harmony between people, and comfort, in strong contrast to the excluding discomfort, even danger, of Laveau-Harvie's parents' house. 'I am at home' in Hong Kong, she realises, her son's neighbours wishing her 'Goodnight, mother' (p. 70). The bright, organic optimism of this section seems healing after the traumatic visit to her parents, in which some of the worst memories of her childhood are interspersed with such events as her father saying, 'They'll be lost if you leave them here' as he returns 'pictures of my children, his grandchildren, that I have sent over the years.' (p. 90). This admission that children, family, love, will be 'lost' in such a household is poignant, and terrifying.

When the author finds her father's dressing gown on her bed 'it smells of nothing', suggesting that this loving gesture is as ineffectual as this man has been as a father.

- The example above is one of many in the memoir in which the author stops, perhaps to step back from the emotions engendered by **what** she is writing, and addresses us as readers, drawing our attention to the way she is writing. Students could use this device of authorial intrusion in their own writing.

Allusions

The text is full of allusions to literature, popular culture, history—all the elements that have contributed to Laveau-Harvie's development. Many students might not be familiar with them, but a quick Google search will explain them. It is part of the way that our reading enlarges our knowledge and understanding. The important thing is to see the effect of the use of allusions, what the author is telling us.

An example, one of many, can be found on page 8, when in Chapter 2, the sisters stay at their parents' house. Laveau-Harvie expresses her disapproval of the open window in her sister's bedroom by alluding to *In Cold Blood*; she evokes the destruction of the original fauna by the reference to 'where the buffalo no longer roam', bringing to mind the 1872 song, *Home on the Range*, which romanticised the prairie and its cowboys.[35] Not only conveying that she thought it was risky to leave a window open at night, the author is reminding us that, like Truman Capote, she is writing 'creative nonfiction'; the presence of criminals, 'hoons' and the dispossessed in the memoir's landscape is enforced by the reference to the crime in the other book, committed by similar young men. The effect is to emphasise the extent to which the house, so well-equipped, is so vulnerable to what society has formed. We are also reminded of Canada's colonial past and the loss of the buffalo population.

33 https://thegarretpodcast.com/vicki laveau harvie/
34 https://thestellaprize.com.au/2019/04/vicki laveau harvies 2019 stella prize acceptance speech/
35 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K YK7ebcZ20

Close study

Passage 1

'In the kitchen ... splintering wood.' (**p. 5**)

Chapter 1 ends on images of breaching and breaking: the mother's 'hipbone crumbles and breaks', the isolation 'splintering'. The fall is the catalyst for the memoir. The imagery of war is established by 'no-go zone', while the opening of the door 'to strangers' foreshadows the later exposing of the house and the lives for the estate sale. The season is early winter—relatively mild—'just a drift of powder from a cruller donut'.

Laveau-Harvie makes use of the pathetic fallacy, in the way that the environment and landscape are endowed with human characteristics. The seasons take on emotional weight; the summer is present through the winter as a 'memory'. Conversely, human beings are identified with qualities of the landscape and are objectified. Find examples of this through the text. By the end of this chapter, Laveau-Harvie has introduced her readers to her concerns, to her writing style, to her family, to the landscapes of her parents.

- Ask students to list in dot points all the **factual** information they have found so far in the book.

Passage 2

'We're going to lunch in Shawnessy ... an iota of affection.' (**pp. 98-103**)

The parents' 'paradise' is only 'a mile from the six-lane highway ... a solid ribbon of eighteen wheelers is gunning it full throttle' (p. 5). Roads and vehicles become images of the society itself. The contrast between the natural world and the man-made world is ever-present. This is encapsulated in the drive to Shawnessy for lunch, which is both hilarious and horrifying. Choosing to travel in the 'big, posh flatbed pickup truck with a module on the back', somehow forced by his wife to go 'to lunch in Shawnessy', the frail old man has to make a series of left turns (the equivalent of right turns in Australia) across three lanes of speeding trucks. Their destination, at which, amazingly, they manage to arrive, is another emblem of modern life—the strip-mall, detached from its natural surroundings, impersonal, lacking appeal or attractiveness. It is here, in the Cheeky Chicken Diner, that the father tells his daughter that he won't see her again during this visit, and that 'the spark of family feeling, an iota of affection' cannot be discerned (p. 103).

- Find three quotations from this episode that emphasise the seriousness of the predicament of father and daughter.
- Also find three quotations which make it sound funny.
- How does the sentence 'I am momentarily unable to make a sentence that contains a verb and does not include poo.' give insight into the author's character, as well as her panic?
- Is the mother trying to kill them? Why would she?
- What does the Cheeky Chicken Diner symbolise?

This section foreshadows the account of the sisters' drive from Vancouver to Okotoks which makes a similar point about 'one of the most dangerous highways in the world' (p. 170), the discordance between the austere natural beauty of the landscape and the violence inherent in the descriptions of the highway. Human influence is seen as lethal—literal warfare is waged on the snow to create avalanches, the forests are dying, 'victims of the Japanese beetle' which 'warmer winters' have empowered. In order to avoid being 'mowed down' (p. 171) by the many trucks roaring through, the sister flashes their way back to the motel. The comedy mixes with the serious.

Passage 3

'Just of Highway 7 ... dissolves into the frosty air.' (**pp. 215-217**)

By finishing with the imagined conversation between Napi and the mother's spirit, all the stories told in this book come together in some kind of culmination; the mood is gentler than in any other encounter with the mother in life. The myth of the Okotok fuses the natural and the human worlds, also for the first time in the memoir.

The stark horror of the author's life is distanced by the last three pages, and we also need to remember that Laveau-Harvie is exploring and describing a fairly long period of time—six years—and that she is no longer the child, adolescent and adult who was subjected to such suffering, which could suggest that time has given her some ability to heal. Additionally, although she completed it in 2014, she 'put it in a drawer' for years, before sending it to a publisher. This suggests that it was the act of writing that was important to her.

- Does the book end on a hopeful note? Is this passage enough to counterbalance the shattering violence of the rest of the text? Is the whimsical voice of Napi stronger than the language of warfare that has pervaded the writing in the other 26 chapters?
- What is the effect of Laveau-Harvie using the myth which explains the presence of the Rock, the Okotok?
- What does this story have to do with the mother, and the relationship of the author to her?
- What is the importance of clothes—the mother's 'farmed mink' and 'calfskin' shoes, and Napi's cloak?
- What, if anything, has Vicki Laveau-Harvie finally understood about herself and her family?
- What is the effect of Laveau-Harvie's framing of the book with the Okotok and the myth?

Further activities

Testing memories

- Students work in pairs.
- Describe a common experience to their partner. This could be supplied by the teacher, or be an account of a film or television show they have both seen.
- Report to the class on similarities and differences between 'ways of seeing'. Did anyone tell a lie? Probably not—people bring views, preconceived ideas, faith, opinions, expectations with them.
- Ask students to describe a vivid moment in their own family's past, and to compare it with another family member's perception of it.

Visual representation of the structure

- Depending on your school calendar, this activity could be started in an orientation class, so that students' study of the text begins as early as possible, and is based in a grasp of the 'shape' of the memoir. Ideally, this would be in the form of a display in the classroom, that could be referred to and added to as students' knowledge and ideas evolve. It could work equally well electronically.
- Choose coloured paper to represent the present—the experiences the author underwent during the limited time span of six years. Have one sheet for each chapter, and one for the prologue—A3 is best. Choose another, contrasting colour for the flashback episodes, for the intrusions of the past.
- *There is a crack, a crack in everything*
  That's how the light gets in[36]

  Leonard Cohen's song lyrics provide an apt metaphor that can help us build insight into the way Laveau-Harvie has interwoven past and present. Some students might disagree that 'light' is what the flashes of earlier family events bring, but throughout the book is a sense that the author is attempting to find meaning, a sense of wholeness in a set of circumstances that is by definition 'erratic'.
- Each time students notice a flashback, they could cut a vertical slit at that point in the chapter piece of paper, annotate a sheet in the other colour chosen, and insert it in the slit.

36 Song by Leonard Cohen, 'Anthem'.

- Soon they will have a very colourful guide to the memoir's structure.
- Alternatively, students could create this 'structure map' as a quilt, as described above.
- For further refinement, students could colour-code the insertions according to how happy or unhappy these intrusions are. We wouldn't expect many happy ones, but it could give rise to an interesting discussion, or argument!

Reading from different points of view

- List as many instances from the book as possible which could be used to argue that the mother is a victim because she is female.
- Conversely, do the same to argue that she is mentally ill, and thus is incapable of recognising anyone's needs and desires but her own.
- How do we fit in Vicki and her sister? Are they fulfilling traditional female roles?
- ' ... according to Freud, modern civilization through its family and social dynamic structure bridges the gap between creation and destruction where individuals find themselves in varying degrees of tension and anxiety due in part to the conflict that arises when desires come into conflict with a socially constructed perspective of what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.'[37]

  In groups, discuss Freud's statement, and discuss to what extent you agree, giving as many examples that agree with it, or refute it, as possible.

  Discuss the extent to which the memoir suggests that Vicki's mother's behaviour, and indeed, her life, can be explained by the frustration of her desires in the face of societal roles and expectations.

  Is there any evidence in the text that the family, as a microcosm of society itself, nurtures and protects its members?

'Victim positions'

- Using the four 'victim positions' developed by Atwood, listed in the **Perspective on the text** section, work in pairs or small groups to discuss each one, and what it might involve.
- Find examples from *The Erratics* for each of these positions, if possible, justifying your examples with quotations from the text.

Sisters

- Create a table comparing the two sisters and their lives. Categories could include: family, choice of life style, career, values, personality, even what each chooses to keep from the parents' house.
- Collect a vocabulary of words to describe each of them; which sister might these terms apply to? *reticent, analytical, hopeful, emotional, protective, miserable, efficient, altruistic, emotionally damaged, caring, kind-hearted, volatile, practical, cold, conscientious, humane, brutal, dutiful, loving, wounded, happy*. For every word chosen for a sister, provide three examples and three quotations to justify your opinion.

Extension ideas to discuss and write about

- The notion of the unreliable narrator; to what extent can we trust the narrator to give us the 'truth'? Is the very genre of memoir conducive to 'alternative' facts? Remember the value Laveau-Harvie puts on language and truth, and her dismissal of the idea that facts are not stable and unnegotiable.
- Why would she write this memoir and not publish it for several years?
- Evaluate her claim that 'I write but nobody knows me. I'm totally unknown ...' (p. 20)

Reviews of *The Erratics*

Evaluate, with evidence from the text, the following excerpts from reviews of *The Erratics:*

- 'There are many uneasy truths in this book. It's occasionally difficult to feel empathy for the narrator, with her myriad blind spots, and the way her desires too often lead her to fashion the world according to her own needs – seen in her failure to understand the psychiatrist's serious hesitation to commit her mother to a locked ward unless she is genuinely a threat to herself or to others. In her too easy belief that her father's carer is a "gold-digger". And in the many judgments that are delivered down the telephone line from half a world away, after she returns to Sydney.'[38]
- 'What great freedom is awarded to a memoirist with no loyalties to answer to. Laveau-Harvie chooses not to probe into the backstory of her parents, and why should she? Having

37 https://www.fau.edu/athenenoctua/pdfs/Alejandro%20Aparicio.pdf
38 https://theconversation.com/vicki laveau harvies remarkable uncomfortable memoir wins the 2019 stella prize 115120

endured so much, she has no responsibility to concern herself with motives. Similarly, while in Fidler's interview she acknowledged her mother's narcissistic personality disorder, she doesn't explore the diagnosis in the text.'[39]

How do these examples shed light on what we learn of the values of the society depicted in *The Erratics*?

Another comparison

Two images of the wastage and disconnect from nature in the North American experience can be found in the television series, *Mad Men*, and in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. In the first, the Draper family picnic in a park. When they pack up to return home, they leave all their rubbish. There is a shot in which the camera rests on the now-deserted park, strewn with detritus, a metaphor for their entire way of life.[40]

The latter example is the one in *The Great Gatsby* where the eponymous hero demonstrates his worthiness and success to Daisy by displaying his shirts to her. The tragic mistakenness of both characters is demonstrated here, as the accumulation of wealth and the accompanying voracious consumerism, with the underlying corruption that has enabled this excess, is confused with love. 'He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel ... Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.'[41]

- Collect examples from the memoir which directly or more subtly portray a society in which consumerism and the amassing of wealth and possessions have created an absence of more important values.

Covers

Students could compare the two covers of *The Erratics*. Which offers the most accurate insight into the ideas and values of the text? Laveau-Harvie says, 'When the publisher was designing a cover for *The Erratics*, I insisted on the Rockies being visible somewhere. The Southern Alberta landscape of foothills and mountains is where my heart lives, and it is a character in the book.'

Key quotes

'My parents live in paradise' (**p. 4**)

In Chapter 1, after we are introduced to the situation and have been given a brief description of the mother in hospital, Laveau-Harvie's reference to 'paradise' is surprising; she extends this metaphor, lyrically painting a picture of the expanses of 'you and the sky and the distant mountains', the repetition of 'and' extending the vista. 'paradise' conjures up visions of a pristine Garden of Eden, innocent and bountiful, and the author often gives this impression when she describes the landscape. However, this is undercut by the introduction of ownership in 'twenty acres', and by the ensuing bitter reference to 'the Hotel California'. The idea of the spoiled wilderness runs through the entire text. The second part of the opening chapter goes 'back a notch in time', to describe how the mother's hip was broken. 'My parents live in paradise' is opposed by the image of the imposed artifice of 'this time-capsule house sealed against the outside world', creating not just curiosity, but a feeling of the presence of latent, almost gothic, horror. Laveau-Harvie intersperses stark clipped phrases, 'No near neighbours', with lengthier descriptive sentences emphasising the relationship, or lack of it, between her parents and their physical and social landscapes. The alliteration of the 'n's is representative of the author's playing with language, perhaps to keep the pain at bay with humour, or perhaps in an attempt to pin down, precisely, what her experience means.

'She has her truth and I have mine'. (**p. 12**)

In this scene, the sisters are presenting their rehearsed act to ensure that their mother cannot come home from hospital after breaking her hip. They are not telling the truth; they are not admitting the mother's long history of 'crazy'; Vicki, the elder, imposes her will on her sister who wants 'validation, vindication'. The social worker is outmanoeuvred, in spite of her attempt to 'go fishing' by referring to 'your time in Venezuela'. The memory and image of their father expertly fly fishing twists the metaphor back against the 'little bureaucrat'; Laveau-Harvie has learned from a master. There's comedy, strain and a sense of triumph here.

Is their dishonesty justified? Is Vicki bullying her sister? Their separate 'truths' could be discussed—is each valid? Do the means justify the ends?

39 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/13/the unmissables the erratics by vicki laveau harvie a memoir of entirely its own genre
40 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhcKuMjvcCk
41 http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200041h.html

'We are petrified in grief, like flies in amber.' (p. 59)

Most of us are familiar with the results of fossilisation of petrified tree resin, a viscous liquid which solidifies into amber, trapping whatever gets stuck in it. Here, the organisms are the sisters, and the viscous liquid is their mother's manipulation.

It is Christmas Eve, and the sisters are preparing to return to their homes. Although Laveau-Harvie admits she is projecting her feelings on to her sister, she writes that they 'try not to feel how strongly we wish to flee, and how strongly we wish to stay.' (p. 58). The evocation of the alliterative image of 'boozed-up Brits on Bondi getting the sunburn of their life' is powerful in its attraction for her; it is 'that far away', energetic, celebratory, uncomplicated. In contrast, the tearful scene indoors, in the hospital, seems bleached of colour and life, pervaded by the cold of the Canadian winter. The words 'flies in amber' suggest paralysis, the sisters so profoundly affected that they become inanimate, preserved rather than sentient, perhaps victims. Words fail the author. Fear is always present when the mother is present; here the sisters are reduced to specimens, will-less, lifeless, equally destroyed by the grief they are still, remarkably, able to feel.

Putting this incident further in context, the next day after Christmas lunch, there is the attempted robbery; the alarm system works, and the sisters do not return to the family home. The tension between the pull of duty, their grief and their separate necessity to survive is seen here and in many other instances. Alluding to Yeats' poem, 'The Second Coming', Laveau-Harvie reassures her sister, 'The centre has held', in tired satisfaction. We are never in any doubt of the ongoing emotional price paid by these women.

'Aren't the mountains beautiful today?' (p. 116)

This 'mantra' is said every day by the 'little person looking toward the sketched-in backdrop of the Rockies' in the editorial cartoon in the daily Calgary paper. It is important because Vicki needed to see this before her mother could 'compile her gallery of horrors for our breakfast edification'. The teenager had to grasp at hope before being overwhelmed by the misery imposed on her by her mother. Many years later, she remembers this mantra, and its importance to her younger self; it is sparked off by her 'drinking in the panorama of the Rockies' from the airport. Throughout the memoir, the landscape, harsh and often forbidding, is always overwhelmingly magnificent, integral to Laveau-Harvie's sense of self. She says, 'In a blog I wrote recently, I said that the Southern Alberta landscape raised me in a way my parents never did, that its beauty and its very harshness teach those who live there about resilience and endurance, transcendence and courage.'[42]

'There is a dining room and a walled garden to walk in. This part of the complex is called Halcyon House.' (p. 204)

Here, Laveau-Harvie is doing more than describing the next stage in her father's slow but inevitable decline as he ages, marked by his movement from dwelling to dwelling. From living at home, five miles from Okotoks with carers, he stays briefly with the sister and her partner before moving himself to Pacific Peace. The author is sceptical about the necessity for the move; each move further corrals the father—now he is at 'the last stop before the end of the line'. The idea of aging as the slow whittling away of choices, autonomy and dignity runs through this text. The mawkish name, 'Halcyon', seems 'Hallmark' and even ironic, with its connotations of peace and tranquillity; the approaching deaths of its residents will supply those. A dictionary check of 'halcyon' also brings the suggestion of calm linked to wealth and prosperity, a reminder that the father's wealth guarantees him this sort of care. If we see his circumference of movement and independence inexorably diminishing, and his privacy invaded, we need to remember that his is a privileged old age. Still, from 'paradise', he has come to this 'walled garden', diametrically opposed to the prairies and foothills.

42 https://writingnsw.org.au/vicki laveau harvie

Analytical text response

1. '*The Erratics* suggests that it is impossible to know the truth about other people.'
   Do you agree?
2. 'In *The Erratics*, Vicki Laveau-Harvie argues that we can never escape the effects of our upbringing.'
   Do you agree?
3. '*The Erratics* paints a grim picture of old age.'
   Discuss.
4. To what extent does *The Erratics* argue that everyone's truth is different in a family situation?
5. 'Everyone is damaged when a member of a family is mentally ill.'
   Do you agree?
6. 'The environment in which we grow up has the capacity to both sustain and irrevocably damage us.'
   Discuss.
7. "Blood calls to blood."
   'Laveau-Harvie argues that we can never escape our family.'
   Do you agree?
8. 'Life is a struggle to survive, even for privileged families.'
   Do you agree?
9. How does Vicki Laveau-Harvie's memoir attempt to discover the 'truth' about her family?

Creative text response

The Study Design requires students to produce for assessment, a creative response to a selected text in written or oral form with a written explanation of decisions made in the writing process and how these demonstrate understanding of the text. Students are reminded that if they elect to deliver this Outcome as an oral presentation it will still be accompanied by a written explanation.

Pointers for the written explanation

- Keep notes delineating the process of decision-making, drafting and changing choices, explaining your reasons as you go.
- Have a series of questions to guide you: How does my piece connect to the text? How does it show insight into the text? Which characters, key moments and themes will I explore? How will I demonstrate my understanding of voice and style? What is my audience? Remember, this is a creative piece which will add to the text, not repeat what is already there, and it is based on a complex knowledge of the text and how it is written.
- Your choices of language need to be carefully made, and justified.
- You might wish to construct an epigraph to preface your creative piece.
- Many of the suggestions in the **Further activities** section of this guide can be used as the starting point for a creative piece of writing. Students are advised to familiarise themselves with the requirements of this Outcome from the outset of their study of *The Erratics*, so that they can plan and prepare slowly as they analyse the text.

Creative response prompts

1. Laveau-Harvie has said, '... if my sister were to write a memoir it would be very different. And she did read the manuscript of this book and she said to me, "I remember those incidents. It's really exact; those incidents I can remember them. What's different is the way I felt about them at the time and the way I've processed them afterwards". So everyone's truth is different in a family situation.'

   Choose one of the incidents / events in the text and write the sister's version, her 'truth'.

2. *The Erratics* ends with the mythic voice of Napi explaining the presence of the Erratic. What myths are relevant to us in Australia? Students could explore a special place or landscape through the telling of a myth. Or they can use a myth to explore a relationship or event in their own lives.

3. Most families have stories handed down; if your family has these, use one / some as the basis for an exploration of your family.

4. Write the obituary for Vicki Laveau-Harvie's mother. You have never met her, and are reliant on public knowledge, looking from the outside. A multi-media presentation is possible here.

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Useful links

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https://thegarretpodcast.com/vicki-laveau-harvie/

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https://www.songfacts.com/facts/eagles/hotel-california

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/13/the-unmissables-the-erratics-by-vicki-laveau-harvie-a-memoir-of-entirely-its-own-genre

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2022
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