The tragedy of Aron Ralston
Robert Bartlett and Clive Palmer

Research Preface

THIS IS A THIRD PERSON ACCOUNT of how American climber Aron Ralston went out one day to Blue John Canyon (Canyonlands National Park, Utah) to climb solo on the rock faces and in the canyons. Before he left, Ralston told nobody of his whereabouts or what he was planning to do. It was a seemingly spur of the moment climb, something which he would later go on to regret.

The fact that he went to the wilderness on his own meant that this story could be written well in two ways; a first person account of his experiences or third person account, there being no-one else there to write it from their point of view. When considering whether to write in the first or third person, Boehmer (2001: 154) states that, “it is one of the central decisions a writer must make, as it affects the angling, the force, the atmosphere and the shape of the story – especially if it’s fiction”. The particular nature of Aron’s account would be challenging to impart in first person, although the conflict between man and mind was an interesting tussle to consider. However, the problem with first person perspective in this story is that, in truth, Aron’s experiences were such a gruesome, traumatising and disturbing event that they deserved to be discussed with sincerity and not overly dramatised. The unfolding events were sufficiently dramatic without embellishing them further. For the writer, it would be immensely difficult to imagine what pain would have been felt by Aron throughout this ordeal and
the psychological boundaries which appeared to have been crossed on this journey of suffering. It seemed as if writing in the first person risked not doing justice to his experiences and perhaps diverting attention to immediate difficulties rather than long term consequences for Aron.

Boran (2005: 120) explores the idea of incorporating more than one character into a story; “whose story you tell determines what kind of story you tell”. Again, this was an interesting concept to consider in this context, as there could be more characters than just Aron himself – although he was alone he did a lot of talking during his ordeal. Whilst climbing in the canyon, a very large loose boulder fell down and crushed Aron’s arm. He was in a narrow gulley at this point and the boulder trapped him in this lonely and hidden position. He was trapped and injured with nobody actually knowing where he was. Ralston was stuck there for six days in total, in which time he battled various forms of psychological problems, including depression, exacerbated by the effect of severe dehydration on his body and mind. During this period he had come to terms with death, made peace with the world and had even recorded a video tape with his free hand, stating his last will and testament. After the fifth day of hanging there, Ralston’s trapped hand and lower arm had died from lack of blood circulation. Taking Boran’s (2005) thoughts into account, it could be important to have a second voice as well as Ralston’s own in the story; to display the nature of the truly awful state that Ralston himself was in. For this reason a sole voice was included, representing the voice of his conscience in the piece. The conscience utters the same phrase of warning which repeats throughout which alters in emphasis and poignancy as events unfold for Aron.

Not only was it the mental struggle that Ralston had to cope with, it was also the physical struggle. For six days, Ralston had just been trapped there trying to force the boulder up and off of his hand and arm. At the end of the six days, when the hand and arm had “died”, Ralston reasoned that to self-amputate his hand and arm was the only way to free himself. It took him one hour to operate fully, using a blunt knife to saw through the muscle, veins and sinew and then using his own body weight to hang and snap the bones. He was now free of the boulder. Although not trapped, Aron was still miles away from his truck and without any means of communication he could not raise the alarm. He proceeded to abseil on his rope, one handed, down a 65 foot cliff face and then hiked, dehydrated, through hot sun
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whereupon he was rewarded for his efforts and saved after he came across several hikers. Ralston was finally air-lifted to hospital to safety, where a life saving operation meant that he can now carry on with his life. He is actually back to his rock climbing and lives an otherwise full and normal life. However, he has found a new and very successful dimension from his arduous experiences as a public speaker and publisher. A truly life – changing event?, arguably for the better with 20:20 hindsight? Possibly.

Boran (2005: 149) also states that the creative writer needs to find a way to appeal to the reader’s senses through scenes. This is a very important factor to consider in how the horror of the situation that Aron finds himself in is conveyed to the reader. The most obvious solution is to make the amputation scene more grotesque in its descriptive nature and to constantly refer to the state that Ralston is in both physically and mentally. However, as mentioned above it seemed that the events as they unfolded were sufficiently dramatic in real life and did not warrant being overplayed.

Evans (2000: 178) explores how the use of background information can add bite to a story. Although Evans (2000) is referring to journalistic writing, it is an appropriate concept to consider when writing a short story. To add in any background of Ralston’s climbing experience could be important, but would also allow room to manoeuvre when considering the subsequent editing. Similarly, background information was equally important to add context to the story. A simple description of Ralston’s situation and how he got there would add a simple but useful context to the story, whilst also providing some factual background to the piece.

Hicks (1999: 131) posts an interesting idea of how even news stories, in the current climate, are written to tease, intrigue and entertain, as well as inform – just as short stories are. It applies to creative writing, just with a little more freedom, but the main objectives of this story are to express the morality of the situation that Ralston finds himself in and to convey his ultimate courageousness in order to survive as well as to inform the reader of his background and why he chose to go through with his actions. An entertainment factor for this tragedy comes through by the use of description, writing style and most importantly the ending.

In conclusion, reading the background information and Aron Ralston’s account of the situation (2005) has provided some interesting angles to provoke thoughts for twists and turns within the creative piece. The
research for this has focused upon how Ralston coped whilst going through his most life-threatening experience and why he decided to take matters into his own hands to extricate himself. The key difference in reading a journalistic piece about the event is that they would ideally be time-lined and factual. Within this story, even though it is fictionalised, the feasibility of how events transpire are realistic, which may been seen to add to the quality of the tragedy as told.

References


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SLOWLY BURNING IN THE MIDDAY HEAT, trapped alone with nothing but his thoughts for company, Aron was trapped in a deep canyon. The boulder, roughly two feet across had fallen and jammed in the narrowing space where Aron was climbing. As the boulder wedged itself in under the force of gravity it trapped his lower right arm pinning him against the wall. His right hand, crushed to smithereens under the weight of a loose boulder, was now nothing more than a death certificate waiting to be served.

Struggling, Aron felt his hopes crushed as another attempt at pushing the boulder upwards failed.

“You shouldn’t have come here alone” his conscience was echoing through his empty, forlorn mind.

“SHUT UP! ARRRRRRRRRRGH! PLEASE, HELP! FOR GOD’S SAKE HELP ME!” Aron screamed, but he knew nobody was there.

“You shouldn’t have come here alone...”

It was the sixth day. Aron Ralston had come, alone, to climb this canyon. Stranded under a tonne of immovable pressure, he was now regretting his decision not to tell someone, anyone, of his whereabouts.

With his free hand, Aron wiped the dust from his mousy hair. The remote walls of the canyon seemed somewhat comforting now; Aron was at a claustrophobic peace. Just two days ago, he estimated, as he made his last will and testament to a small video camera. Staring up towards the boulder, Aron glanced upon his etchings in the side of the rock.
RIP Aron Ralston.

A wry smile formed across his weather-beaten face. Maybe it was the heat, or the lack of water, but Aron knew that this was his grave.

He hissed in pain as dust covered the messy stab wound on his arm. On the ledge above him lay the blunt knife of the micro-tool that he had used to sever the fleshy bits of his right arm. The steel shone scarlet in sunshine.

“Cheap crap” he cursed. The blade was too blunt to cut through bone. He now hung in a bloody, exhausted state, drifting in and out of consciousness as the hours passed by.

With one last effort, he contorted his body upwards and pushed all the remaining strength he had into the boulder. It didn’t budge an inch. Tears began to carve through Aron’s grimy cheeks and before he knew it, he was sobbing against his wounded arm.

Dejected, he watched as a small piece of rock crumbled and fell from the face and smashed on the canyon floor some two hundred feet below him. Nothing left but a pile of smoking dust – and then it hit him. The divine inspiration.

Bones don’t have to be sawn, they can be broken. Why hadn’t he thought of this before?

Reaching over to the ledge, Aron steadied himself, making a vice out of some spare climbing karabiners. Arranging his position to drop his body weight with maximum efficiency against the resistance, he braced and took two deep breaths before snapping the first bone. A crack, followed by a horrendous scream of agony which filled the canyon to its brim.

“No-one can hear you scream”.

“Long full life”, he gasped. Thoughts of his future raced around his head, thoughts that had slowly diminished over the past week. His wife, a young son and a dog running joyfully around the back garden kept playing on repeat in his mind. Even the simple things like meeting friends for a coffee, or reading the paper, seemed like such a luxury at this moment in time.
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For six days, SIX DAYS, Aron had been hanging in utmost agony, slowly going at his dead arm with a blunt blade. The solution had been there all along; so simple, so costly.

Aron began sawing away at the remaining fleshy tissue, blood splurging across his face as he severed through his own artery. Another bone break, another unforgiving scream of anguish.

“Long full life, long full life” Aron spurred himself on, slicing through yet more muscle. He was now covered in crimson; noticing how much blood he was beginning to lose, Aron finally cut through the last bits of skin on the underside of his arm. Finally free from the rocky tomb, Aron lay back against the rock face and looked up to the heavens. A single bead of nauseating sweat dripped off his forehead in the baking sun.

Head spinning and delirious, Aron was struggling to focus on the task before him. He swore he could hear the faint sound of a rotary blade in the distance, but with the tremendous loss of blood and lack of fluid over the past week, he began to put it down to hallucination. Nevertheless, if it was somehow real, it meant that he had less than half an hour to get himself rescued. ‘Birds’ like those don’t stay in the sky long, he reasoned, they need refuelling.

“Come on, man!” He grunted and hauled himself into action.

“You should never have come here alone.”

“COME ON! SHUT UP!” he screamed, kicking away dust in frustration. Spreading his weight across his feet, Aron slowly began to rise from the tomb that encased him. He heaved his way up the side of the canyon, the muscles in his remaining arm straining to keep him alive. Aron had to climb to the top of the canyon and then abseil off the cliff edge to lower ground, and then get back on the trail to civilisation.

The weight of the rope wrapped around his shoulder began to tear through his skin as he climbed, he really couldn’t afford to lose more blood. With one last forceful push, he dragged himself to the top and lay there for a moment, exhausted, before breaking into a fit of hysterical and tearful laughter. He was free.
“Come on, come on, please, come on...” he whispered into the afternoon sun.

Dazed from the heat, Aron picked himself up and clutched at the bloody stump where his forearm used to be. Wrapped in his once white shirt, it was now a deep shade of red and dripping profusely onto the rocky bed below.

He began to stumble the two hundred feet or so towards the cliff edge. Every step was getting heavier, and his eyes were beginning to fade. The sand in his boot was beginning to wear away the skin on the underside of his feet. Each step felt like standing in fire.

“You shouldn’t have come here alone”

“No, come on, just a bit further...” Aron begged his swollen body to carry on. Confused, he began pleading with himself to make it to the cliff edge.

“A...bit...further...”

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Aron broke down on the Cliffside. His head thumped, his mind heavy and he was struggling to breathe. But he’d made it.

“Almost there... almost safe”, he choked.

This time, he definitely heard the comforting roar of rotary blades in the distance. Rescue was on the cards, surely.

“God rewards those who work hard and boy I’ve worked hard here, come on, just a bit further” he muttered to himself.

Not knowing how, a rush of warmth circulated through Aron’s body – somewhere, somehow, they’d come for him. The rope began to slide slowly off his raw shoulder, but battered and bruised, he didn’t care. He wouldn’t need it now. He could taste water, food, bed.

“You shouldn’t have come here alone.”

The noise of engines and whooshing of chopper blades seemed to get louder. On full alert now, Aron stumbled up and mustered enough energy to scream across the deep valleys and into the sky. Laughing, he started to leap
up and down, adrenaline pumping through his veins like electricity. Jumping again, he fell backwards awkwardly onto his ankle.

“Bloody rocks” he cursed, but he was too tired to care. Help was finally at hand.

Suddenly, Aron noticed a hissing noise gradually getting louder around him. Like interference on a radio struggling to find its station, it was quite a distraction. He looked again to the skies, nothing there. Strange. The sun pierced through him still. Was it the helicopter?

“You shouldn’t have come here alone.” Hiss. HISSSSS.

And then, silence. Aron looked at his feet in shock. The rope was gone. Scarpering towards the cliff edge, he peered over the side to the horror below. Falling softly through the air, the rope twirled like yellow ribbon. As it fell twisting through the air as Aron stood there, motionless. He sank to his knees in defeat, sobbing into the hot dust and smacking his remaining fist into the earth. It was over.

“PLEASE, HELP ME!” he screamed, his voice cutting out in tears half way through. Shattered, he lay there, weeping. Thoughts of his future began to fade from memory again, the sun slowly frying away his self belief.

He could feel the blood escaping rapidly from his wounds now, he was getting weak. The effort summoned to fight every instinct in his body when amputating his arm had begun to catch up with him. He coughed, spluttering up more crimson as he gasped for breath.

“You shouldn’t have come here alone”.

Aron rolled over onto his back, fighting for his own body to stay awake. Visions were racing through his mind; the first climb, the canyon in the distance, a loose boulder falling, crushing, a blood curdling scream, bones shattering. Light, oh the piercing light!

His heart beating furiously against his chest, the pounding seemed to echo throughout the whole canyon. Aron was shaking uncontrollably now; the weight of the light crushed him down into the dirt. Two hundred feet below him, deep into the canyon, laid his trusty rope, still warm with his blood. He
lay there, trying to contain the shaking. The sky seemed whiter than normal, a peaceful palate of nothingness.

Slowly, Aron closed his eyes and listened to the faint sound of the rotary blades fly off into the distance.

“You shouldn’t have come here alone”.

And with that, the world stopped turning for Aron Ralston.