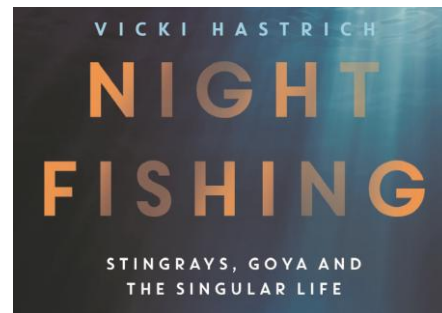


# Heartaches of sweet little fish

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Weekend Australian by Gretchen Shirm  
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In her first work of nonfiction, *Night Fishing*, Sydney-based novelist Vicki Hastrich uses the essay form to turn her gaze resolutely outward, exploring how the external world reflects upon the self.

The tone of the first essay, *the hole*, is deeply elegiac, about the “semi-regular holidays” Hastrich took with her family to the NSW Central Coast. When, as an adult, Hastrich returns to the area to seek out the meditative calm of fishing, she discovers part of her yearning is a desire to be closer to the ocean.

A neighbour gifts her a “10-foot fibreglass dinghy” and Hastrich patches up the holes and launches the boat: “Squid”. The title of the essay is a reference to a mythic place the adults went to fish, which Hastrich ultimately discovers herself.

In *my life and the frame*, Hastrich describes her lifelong need to “frame” the world, tracing it back to the window of the family holiday house. She also delves into the history of the frame in art, which demand pictures “so much so that an empty frame will convert whatever can be seen within into a picture”. This essay becomes an account of how Hastrich came to discover the essay as her “new frame”, allowing her to “look at everything more straight on”.

*Amateur hour at the broken heart welding shop* links Hastrich’s own artistic impulses to her grandfather’s, “a first-class amateur”. Her grand-father, a German immigrant, owned a welding shop on Sydney’s Parramatta road, which famously claimed to be able to “weld anything but a broken heart”.

Known for his skill with “impossible jobs”, he welded together a bronze statue of a “classical figure of a woman holding aloft the wreath of peace” as a war memorial. When the mayor inquired about the welder, the artist described him, tactfully, as “French”.

The essay self-portrait follows an experiment in which Hastrich films herself sleeping and takes a series of selfies. The essay, much like the book, is predicated on the idea that “the visible contained hidden secrets”.

Perhaps the most intimate of these essays, is the titular *night fishing*, in which Hastrich remembers her father’s death before her eyes and segues to a self-imposed challenge to fish at night

As she launches the boat onto the dark sea, overcoming her trepidation, she looks back to the houses on the shore, which appear “as if these people have turned their backs on me ... the strange wild thing out at midnight”.

In the final part of this essay, Hastrich recalls a high-school conversation in which she expressed a desire to “marry a fisherman”, who never materialised in her life. Instead, Hastrich fulfilled that role for herself and there is a strong pioneering spirit here; many of these essays reject convention, chief among them the idea that a single woman cannot live a rewarding life.

This is what makes Hastrich’s closing image of the young girl waving from the shore to herself in her boat so moving. The self is a continuous feedback loop formed out of memory and external input, and, exploiting these tools, Night Fishing becomes a triumph of form.