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VOLUME 6 | 2020

# writing in practice



THE JOURNAL OF CREATIVE WRITING RESEARCH

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***Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research***  
**Volume 6 (May 2020)**

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**Principal Editor:** Derek Neale

***Interested in contributing?***

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# Welcome

## From the Editor

Volume 6 of *Writing in Practice* offers an exciting blend of exegetic reflection, essential and individual research approaches that consider the writing process both in minute detail and in multiple and far reaching contexts, including cultural, experiential, educational and publishing settings. The essays reflect wide-ranging engagement and critical analysis in considering what it is to write, what it means to encourage and teach others to write, and how it might be possible to seek different ways of investigating the creative process. The angles of focus brought to bear in this issue reveal the subject area to be alive and healthy. Writing is an activity that demands many hours, days and weeks of lockdown-type solitude. Yet it is an activity, as we are aware, that also demands a working knowledge of social, emotional, artistic and every-day spheres. Writing as an activity, in this sense, seems to speak to and of our times.

This volume's guest article comes from Australia: Jen Webb discusses the material, linguistic and physical elements of narrative, the philosophical provenance of such perspectives, and how we might lead writing students towards an intellectual as well as a creative approach to their work. Joanne Reardon's article considers material along with visual aspects, in revealing the interplay between collaboration and ekphrasis in a site-specific work. Sean Fitzgerald critically examines scientific knowledge via a combination of critical reflection and a type of fiction which is science-informed, specifically focused on genetic science. Leanne Bibby uses the prism of a ghost story and its setting, along with her own writing practice to explore the painful history of

Roman Catholicism in England during the Reformation, also referring to literary and cultural theories to examine fiction's relationship to historical discourse and the idea of the archive. More recent history comes in Edward Hogan's subject, the impact of oral accounts on the development of a novel, specifically in relation to 20<sup>th</sup> century police history; his article also reveals a history of cinema-going during the same period and how the rolling film programmes of the time might echo a contemporary novel's narrative disruption.

Liz Mistry investigates diversity, considering inclusion and representation in the genre in which she writes, crime fiction, scanning publishing statistics and writing approaches for more expansive narratives. Graham Mort emphasizes the inherent diversity of our discipline's research possibilities, focusing on the methodology of a funded, multilingual writing project in South Africa, with antecedents in several other international practice-led initiatives; he reflects on the inter-disciplinary research potential of Creative Writing as a subject. Rose Michael, Ronnie Scott and Michelle Aung Thin share fascinating insights into their research and editing processes, approaches that inform ethics and aesthetics in relation to point of view and voice; they offer three case studies: a literary speculative fiction, a novel concerning sexuality and a young adult novel set among Rohingya children experiencing the 2016-17 military operations in Myanmar.

Megan Hayes and Sophie Nicholls examine the web of related roles encountered by the modern writer; within

the contexts of writing and wellbeing, combining interests in writing, researching and facilitating can be essential and require integrative approaches. Kevan Manwaring investigates experiential research, advocating location visits but also oral history and song in the creation of a transmedia fantasy novel. Michael Fox explores folktale types and motifs as aids to identify the building blocks of stories, further deploying such research and reference points to inform teaching; he focuses on the story features and shapes underlying both *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*. Another approach to solving the blank page is addressed by Amina Alyal and Oz Hardwick who consider visual hallucinations and pareidolia, while speculating that writers might, as part of their creative process, access pre-existing texts, as suggested in the testimony of a poem's evolution.

Such rich scope and flexibility of critical attention is to be applauded, as is the new format, colour and layout in the journal. You may note the addition of images and the potential to download a complete volume. These innovations are all thanks to Lisa Koning, NAWE's new publications manager: Volume 6 is her first issue of *Writing in Practice*. Welcome, Lisa!

### **The Issue Editors**

Our three Issue Editors (all on the NAWE HE Committee) offered an expert eye and consideration throughout. My gratitude to:

Dr Celia Brayfield is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University.

Dr Francis Gilbert is Senior Lecturer in Education at Goldsmiths University of London

Professor Andrew Melrose is Emeritus Professor of Children's Writing at The University of Winchester and occasional Editor, *Axon: Creative connections*, *Axon Capsule* (Special Issues).

### **Reviewers**

Thank you to all our peer reviewers for their excellent support, for the quality of their analysis, and for the positive manner in which they offered their judgement and suggestions for improvement. We are always looking for more reviewers. If you are interested, please be in touch via the email address on the *Writing in Practice* webpage.

### **The Next Issue**

The submissions deadline for the next issue, Vol.7, is 26th June 2020 – you will note that this will be a special issue focused on multimodal writing, but we are also accepting articles on other topics as usual. In Volume 6, we have again been delighted to showcase essays from Creative Writing PhD students. We welcome such work, along with work from the broader field of practice, research and scholarship. Creative work itself is welcome when integral to an article. *Writing in Practice* is not Creative Writing's only peer-reviewed journal but it is one of few internationally. By reading it, submitting work to it and joining its peer review college, you are helping to enrich your subject community.

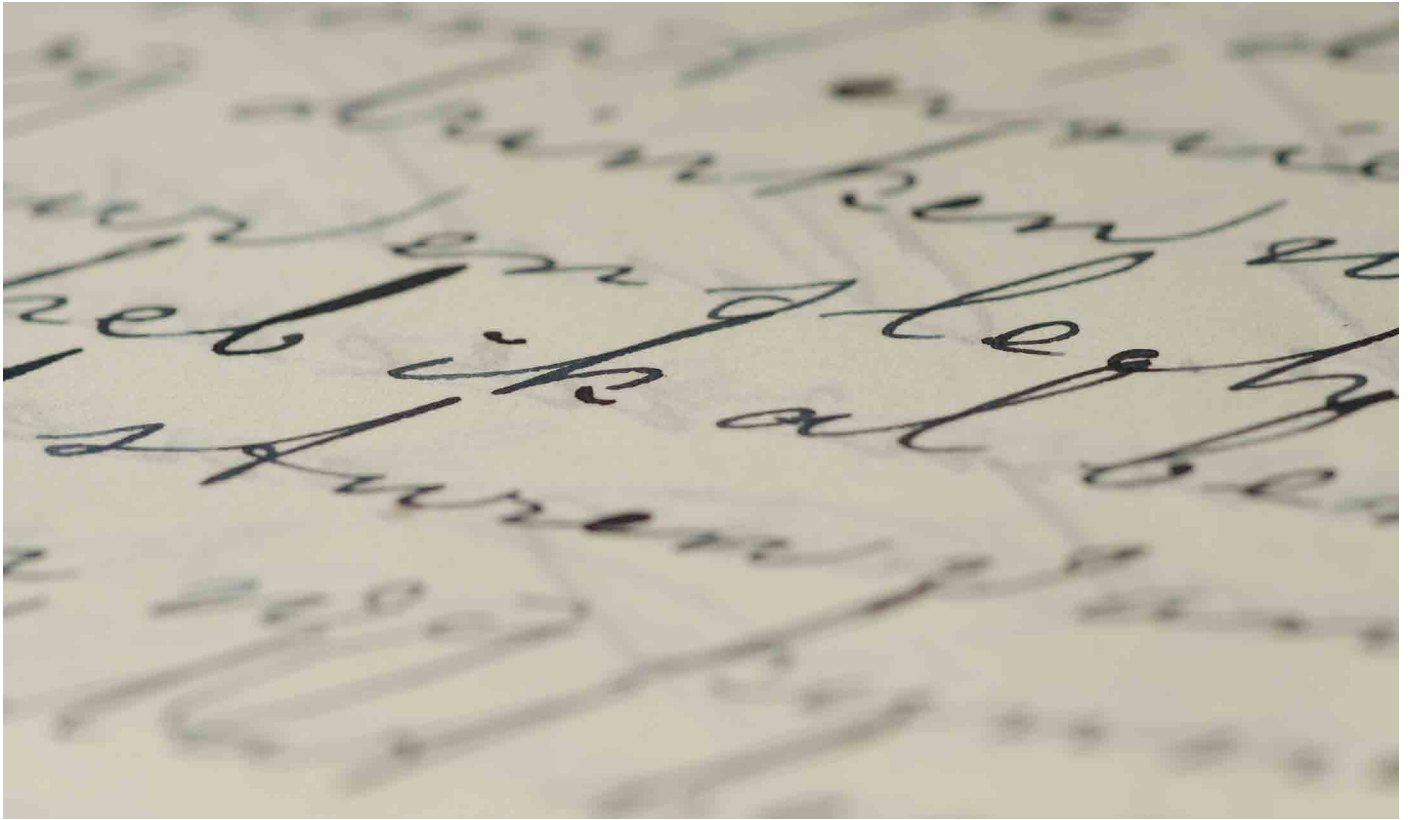
*Dr Derek Neale,*

*Principal Editor, Writing in Practice;*

*Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, The Open University*

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# Let the writing be of words

from writing stories to writing materials

Jen Webb

## ABSTRACT

Across the Anglophone world (and elsewhere), creative writing courses are proliferating. A remarkably high number of tertiary education institutions now offer to train students at undergraduate, graduate coursework and postgraduate research levels. While few such courses enjoy the huge numbers who enrol in, say, the business or communication faculties, there is a steady and growing number of people who believe they have a story to tell in prose, poetry or script, and who want to be trained in the techniques and in the field. Not many of our graduates go on to work as professional published writers; and not all of our graduates are sophisticated users of narrative; or even of language. Writing is not alone in this; all disciplines produce graduates with uneven skills and capacities. But I suspect that in the case of writing, we tend to confuse means and ends – to focus on the book *inside* the person, and not on the material that is used to make it. By “material” I mean ideas and the interest in narrative, and also language – vocabulary, syntax, punctuation, organisation – and ideas. In this paper I discuss ways of engaging with these two different, but related, aspects that should be part of the attributes possessed by our graduates at all level.

Let the snake wait under  
his weed  
and the writing  
be of words, slow and quick, sharp  
to strike, quiet to wait,  
sleepless.  
(from William Carlos Williams, "A sort of a song")

Over two decades ago, Brian Eno threw out a challenge to the creative sector, stating:

The arts routinely produce some of the loosest thinking and worst writing known to history ... The lack of a clear connection between all that creative activity and the intellectual life of the society leaves the whole project poorly understood, poorly supported and poorly exploited. (Eno 1996: 258-59)

This was part of the (perhaps a little hyperbolic) speech he gave on the occasion of the 1995 Turner Prize award ceremony (the prize won that year by Damien Hirst), so it was directed at writers in the visual rather than literary arts. Nonetheless, Eno's complaint is relevant across the sector, and I use it as a springboard into this discussion of what I identify as something of a problem in how we teach creative writers. This discussion may seem unabashedly polemic; however, it is offered not in the spirit of debate, but rather as part of the ongoing discussion in the academic creative writing community about how we might offer our students (and ourselves) both the avenues, and the capacity, to further "the intellectual life of the society".

This is an important issue, because of the remarkable proliferation of writing courses and hence of writing graduates in Australia, the UK and elsewhere (excepting the USA) since the 1980s. A very high proportion of tertiary education institutions now train students at undergraduate, graduate (coursework) and postgraduate (research) levels. While few of these institutions enjoy the huge enrolments in creative writing awards that may be found in, say, the business or communication faculties, there is a steady and growing number of people who know they have a story to tell, and who want to be trained in the techniques and in the field of literary production.

While this is pleasing – because people really believe there is value in narrative, understand its

affordances, and are confident that they themselves can participate in its practice – I would assert that writing is more than story, and that the teaching of writing should incorporate a broader focus. After all, for thousands of years humans have managed to tell good stories despite the lack of tertiary courses designed to train storytellers. So, while I welcome both our students and their narrative impulses, I remain unconvinced that conveying a good grasp of narrative structure should be our primary aim. People will, after all, write stories; some people – whether formally trained or autodidacts – will go on to produce impressive bodies of work. One would hope our graduates will be well to the front of that phalanx – I'm certainly not opposed to literary success – but my concern is with how best to deliver people who possess important knowledge, technical aptitudes, ethical thinking and the other facilities so necessary to produce literature that contributes richly to the creative field and to society more broadly.

The graduate attributes listed in most tertiary institutions' policies on the generic skills their students will possess – policies that are remarkably similar across institutions – include the capacity to think creatively; have an enquiring mind; possess a body of knowledge appropriate to their field; possess technical facility and professional understandings; and have a commitment to ethical practice. These should be part of the toolkit all graduates take into their professional futures, regardless of the course they studied. Teaching academics are expected to use these aspirational lists to structure our classes; and we do, of course. However, given the exigencies of the curriculum, attention typically focuses on specific discipline areas, and the skills peculiar to it; sometimes at the expense of the more generic skills. As a consequence, in creative writing courses at most universities I know, considerable energy is committed to transferring knowledge about the mechanics of story. We teach students to read closely and intelligently; we convey the elements of narrative – plot, character, dialogue, setting, voice, perspective and all – and coach them through modes of practice,

genres and forms. By the end of their studies, most of our students have a respectable grasp of narrative and can produce a respectably crafted work. They understand the uncertain imperatives of story arc, characterisation, setting; they can illuminate a moment of insight or event, can tap into an emotional state, can reflect an image in words. This is commendable. Granted, few of our graduates become prizewinning authors, or pursue writing careers (though, marvellously, some do). But this is not an outcome writing programs bear alone: especially in the creative field, where job opportunities are limited and financial rewards low, few people can make a living from their practice, and anecdotal evidence suggests that though a small proportion of graduates are still working at their practice five years or more after completing their studies, they are well informed about the world of literary arts, are excellent readers, and capable of creative thought and expression.

What concerns me here is not the ability our graduates do or do not possess to craft a story or make a living from their writing practice. Rather, my concern is that, in at least some cases, they do not have much to work with beyond their ideas. In the past couple of decades, during which time I have taught hundreds of students, examined some sixty postgraduate dissertations (many of them doctorates in creative writing), and worked as a book and journal editor in both theoretical and creative fields, I have seen a great quantity of the product of our graduates. While there is rarely any doubt about the energy of their ideas, the urgency of the problems they are tackling, or overall the depth of their thinking, it is rare that I have been able to identify a real sense of language, a real tact where words are concerned, a real appreciation of the effects of choice of word or word order, or even any real understanding of basic grammar and syntax. Indeed, like Brian Eno I have been known to complain that I have seen “some of the ... worst writing” – and this from people trained in the art.

So, what isn't working? My suspicion is that our students are not adequately taught a genuine respect for the materials in creative work. “Making,” wrote Cameron Tonkinwise (2008), “involves working with materials. It involves a knowing about materials ... [and] what materials can be made to become.” Our graduates need this sort of knowledge. For writers, “materials” includes, of course, the structures of narrative, image and argument; but also, and importantly, words, punctuation, grammar and

syntax. Students in performing arts, where the body is a key material, and in visual arts, where practitioners must handle chemicals, sharp objects, electrical and mechanical equipment, are routinely trained to know their materials intimately, and instructed about the importance of handling those materials judiciously, treating them with deep respect and even caution. Writing students and graduates do not consistently show a similar understanding of the power, and the potential risks, of the materials we use: words, phrases, sentences. Yet without such understanding, and concern, and even passion for those materials, their future writing is likely to be limited.

Annie Dillard tells an anecdote that resonates with me and with many writers and writing-academics I know:

A well-known writer was collared by a university student who asked, “Do you think I could be a writer?”

“Well,” the writer said, “I don't know – do you like sentences?” (Dillard 1989: 70)

*Do you like sentences?* Is it possible to “be a writer” without having a real taste for sentences? While I have seen much passion for narrative among writing students, I have seen little comparable passion for sentences, although sentences are key building blocks of story. Without sentences, it is not possible to craft a story, a poem, an essay, a script. (Okay, maybe a poem doesn't need sentences; but the lines of a poem still respond to the logic of the sentence, if only by dismissing it.) I suspect that what is needed – among the growing list of things we need to teach more effectively and efficiently – is the capacity to engender in students both a passion and a respect for materials; and with that, skill in the particularities, idiosyncrasies and potential of the “stuff” of writing. All our efforts to teach the first aspect – the construction of a story or essay – will get students only part of the way to becoming writers in the fullness of their craft.

Let me explain this assertion by way of anecdote: I enjoy reading (“reading”) poetry in languages not my own. I have spent hours prowling through, say, Neruda in Spanish, or Mayakovsky in Russian, or Ovid in Latin, in the same sort of spirit that students are, very often, persuaded to write a story or a poem: that is, to do it without much *a priori* knowledge. My reading captivates me, but it has not provided



me with fluency in Spanish, Russian or Latin, any more than the considerable effort students put into their writing necessarily generates in them the foundational skills for writing. Yes, they need to immerse themselves in their practice; but just as a lifetime of poetic immersion without a knowledge of the language will never provide me real facility with Spanish or Russian or Latin, so too the students, thrown in the deep end as they are, are unlikely to get the return on their investment they might expect.

Of course, we need to train our students to write, and encourage them to write often, and spontaneously; of course, we need to direct them to the works of others, and give them the analytical tools needed to engage; but this alone will not necessarily make them writers. For that, they need to possess both the materials of writing, and the skills to use those materials. They need, for example, to know the difference between a contraction and a possessive; to understand how a pronoun refers back to a referent, or the ways a participle can operate; they need to know the difference between comma, semi-colon and colon; and so on. These are not exciting topics, but they are the mechanics of effective *and* of experimental communication.

No one possesses these knowledges intuitively; though humans are born hardwired for grammar, most of us develop little more than what is necessary for instrumental communication. Writers need more than the basics; they need to know their materials at a very deep level; to internalise the shape and taste of words, the music that punctuation causes, the breath and beat of a shapely phrase. Ideally, they will be able to operate in language the way a fish operates in water: according to what Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) has termed a “feel for the game”, a practical sense (*le sens pratique*), a tacit knowledge that comes from being so fully immersed in it that it doesn't need to be consciously attended to. This, in any field of endeavour, comes about only through learning and rehearsing skills until the knowledge is fully incorporated. Students (indeed, any writers) who achieve this level of material knowledge will not necessarily write sentences marked by extreme grammatical accuracy, but they will write elegantly, flexibly, innovatively; and they will be able to make the choices that will result in a new way of thinking-in-writing, new approaches to storying and poetry. This is not necessarily “academic” fiction, or avant garde writing, but it is writing that generates in their readers something to think with; a fresh way

of perceiving the world; a counter to the deadening effects of, say, the daily news.

Here I look to William Carlos Williams who in his 1944 poem, “A sort of a song” (the first lines of which form the epigraph for this paper) announced that there are “no ideas / but in things”. It is the thingliness of ideas as well as objects, the materiality of thought and writing and what is used to build them, that is at stake here. This is, perhaps, at odds with characterisation made of language by many academics: as a field, an ephemeral “space” for communication and production, rather than as material objects (Williams’ “things”). Writers too often associate the term “material” not with language as an ontological form, but rather with the raw ingredients for a story (plot lines, characters, an event). However, drawing on a Heideggerian sense of practice, it is possible to see language as having physical properties that writers can exploit as part of the materiality of our practice, and to render our work more alive, richer, more committed to “ideas / in things”.

Techne, or the craft of shaping, and poesis, or making, are words Heidegger expounded at length in various of his works. Poesis is generally distinguished as the “art” term, and techne as the more humble “expertise” term. Tom Stoppard’s 1972 radio play, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, makes this explicit in the scene where Donner, one of the three avant-garde artists who are the play’s (pompous, quarrelsome, opinionated) characters, announces that:

Skill without imagination is craftsmanship and gives us many useful objects such as wickerwork picnic baskets. Imagination without skill gives us modern art. (Stoppard 1973: 21)

This bifurcated logic – skill, or techne; imagination, or poesis – is an excellent illustration of the commonsense understandings, and the false contradiction in which they result. Heidegger puts the terms to work in a non-binary manner: looking back to their use in the ancient texts, he identifies poesis and techne as terms that possess very similar qualities. Poesis is more than “imagination” (with or without skill), because it incorporates the idea of “being responsible”, of “starting something on its way to arrival” (1977: 292). Techne is more than craft skill: while Heidegger does locate it in the space of

“making”, he also identifies in *techne* a “bringing forth” that is, like *poiesis*, a mode of knowing (Heidegger 1997: 121). In Heidegger’s terms then, one might say that writers definitely need technical skills (*techne*) in order to bring forth works (*poiesis*); but we also need to develop literacy with respect to creative writing-oriented *techne* and *poiesis* in a manner that contributes to the acquisition of graduate attributes: creativity, knowledge, technical capacity, professional understanding et al. Together, and applied to creative writing, *techne* and *poiesis* connote skill in the use of materials, along with skill in thinking and imagination, and an understanding of language as the (*no ideas but in things*) “stuff” of thought.

From this perspective, I’d suggest, writers need to be capable of producing more than a good workable manuscript; their work should aim to “bring forth” something not really visible before, and to achieve a kind of knowing. To reprise and correct Stoppard’s *Donner*, our students should, ideally, possess the sorts of skills that will allow them to make wickerwork baskets that are works of modern art: baskets that contain thought, made by means of art that depends on skill. Such work will be able to call attention to itself and to the space for living it “brings forth”; it will be able to persuade and convince; it will be the work of a writer who is committed to “imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*” (Didion 1976: 224), and thus engage with, and not simply entertain, its readers.

How might we design courses that will train students in an approach to practice that is as much intellectual as it is creative? One current approach, which I find compelling, is to focus on the skills of “material thinking”. This concept, grounded to some extent on Heideggerian notions, was given a new platform by its development in the opening chapter of Paul Carter’s *Material Thinking* (2004), and its further explication in a number of other publications, including a special issue of the journal *Axon: Creative Explorations* (2018, 8.1). Other contributors to this area of thought include Johanna Drucker (2008), Jerome McGann (1993), Caren Florance (2018), Glyn Maxwell (2012), Kristen Kreider (2015), and many others. Though a number of relevant publications on the topic emerge from creative practice as research, or materiality in practice, and though many are written by people whose first line of affiliation is to the plastic, visual or performing arts, a number

are first of all writers; and after all, writing too is a material practice. It engages the whole self in the act of making: not only the kinetic and chemical activity involved in the crafting of the work on paper or screen, but also the phenomenological activity of being in a particular time and place, writing from that context, and within that context making a virtual-dimensional world. Heidegger insisted that “Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building” (Heidegger 1971: 213): and writing is, thus, a material practice, and one that exploits the materiality of language, thought and idea to make a kind of building, a space in which to dwell. This is a mode of knowing, a connection, as Eno has it, between creative activity and the intellectual life of a society, and done well, it should be an absorbing work; a material work, that matters.

An example of such practice can be seen in a work of writing produced not by a writer, but by philosopher/composer John Cage. His “Lecture on Nothing” (1950) [1] – as much a musical performance as a linguistic text – begins with the statement “I am here, and there is nothing to say”. He continues for some time to utter that “nothing”, to respond to the silence of the space by making words that occupy it, that fit it. Out of this language with/in/as silence comes what is one of his more famous expressions: *I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry* (Cage 1961: 109).[2] The phrase has been appropriated by seemingly dozens of bloggers (as I discovered when googling it): people who seem to have missed his point. I’d suggest that having nothing to say, and saying it, does not mean filling spaces with words that are produced without much thought or craft or impulse other than that of exposing one’s private thoughts. It means, I’d suggest, taking that space for “nothing to say”, and producing a “nothing” that, in the pacing of the delivery, in the juxtaposition of word against word, and in the refusal to obey the conventions of the lecture, is both a material product, and a product that matters. It is a reminder that less can be more; it is a reminder that traditions are there to be examined, not obeyed; and it is a reminder that the most common situation or story or practice can become a machine for thinking.

Finally, then, what I propose is that we shift our attention, as teachers and as writers, from the finished product to the process. Focus on material; focus on ideas. We can acknowledge, with Auden (1940: 247), that “poetry makes nothing happen”. But (*pace* Auden), this doesn’t mean the work does

not matter, or that it does not have material effects. Creative practitioners trained at a tertiary level and functioning as creative intellectuals should be able to connect creative activity with intellectual life, and by working with the material of our form, be it commas or verbs or ideas, draw attention to things that matter.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Tertiary Writing Network conference held in New Zealand, 2008.*

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## Notes

1. Cage's 'lecture' is downloadable as an MP3 recording, from [http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/Millennium/Millennium\\_06\\_John-Cage\\_Rothenberg\\_Lecture-on-Nothing\\_UPenn\\_9-28-98.mp3](http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/Millennium/Millennium_06_John-Cage_Rothenberg_Lecture-on-Nothing_UPenn_9-28-98.mp3); it is worth listening to the cadences of his presentation.
2. See too Edwin Morgan's 'Opening the cage: 14 Variations on 14 Words' (1968), in which he takes the 14 words of the phrase and turns them into a fourteen-line poem.

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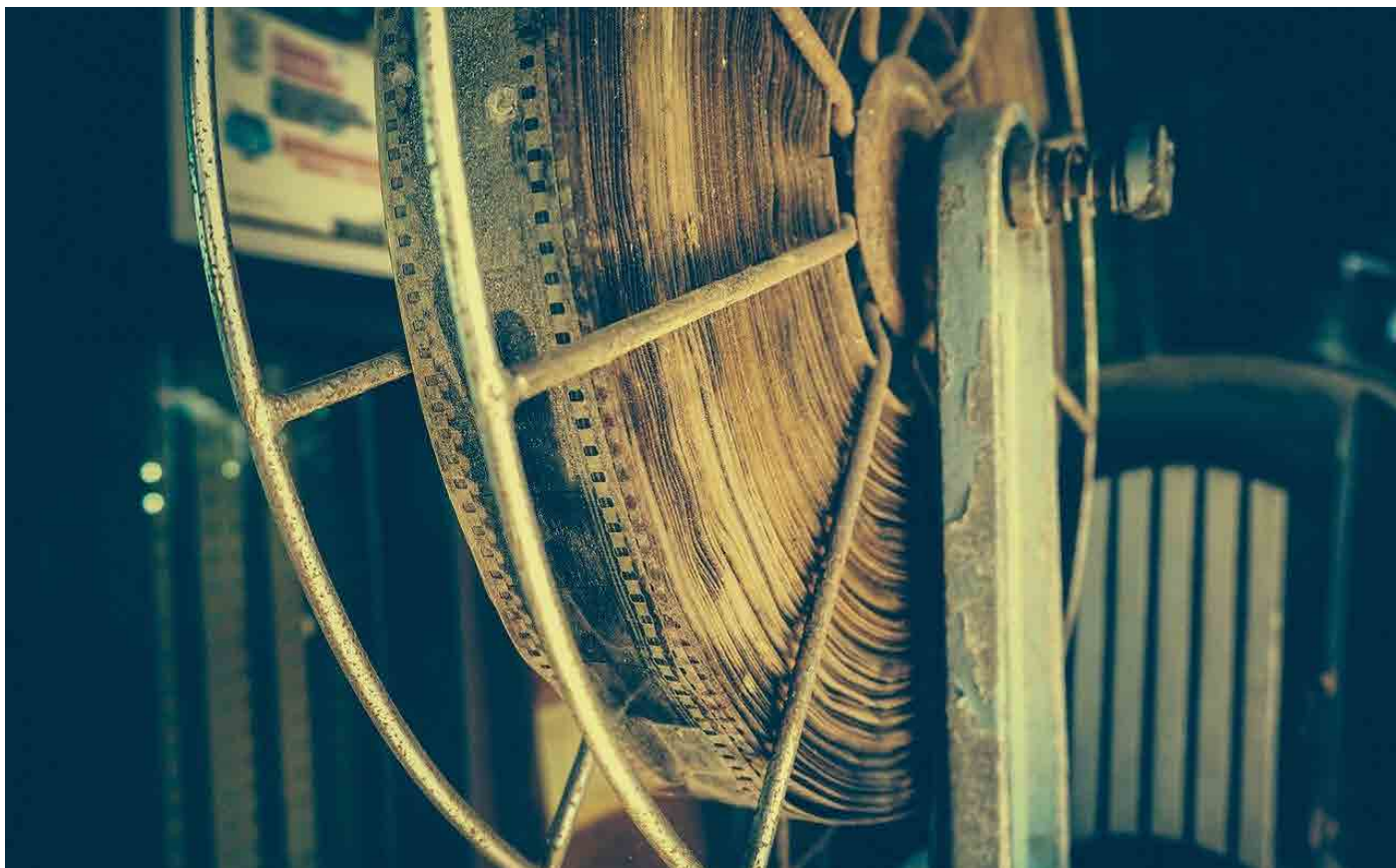
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## About the Author

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# Loops and Reels

## Narrative disruption in film, fiction, and cinemagoing history

Edward Hogan

### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the impact of interdisciplinary research – in this case, specifically oral history – on the form and content of a novel, *The Electric* (2020). Reading between oral histories of police family life and mid-20th century cinemagoing allowed for the creation of a complex fictional character (Daisy Seacombe), who was able to resist the apparently oppressive nature of her social circumstances. The idiosyncratic nature of film star fanclubs, and the impact of cinemagoing on the intellectual, romantic, and working lives of women, are also discussed. In terms of form, the disrupted elements of cinemagoing in the period between 1930-70 suggested a narrative arrangement for the novel, which mirrors the remembered life, and the way it is actively pieced together around gaps and omissions. Rolling programmes meant that films were not always seen in order, start to finish. Such disruptions are often seen as wholly negative, but this paper argues that they can provide for a creative engagement with narrative. The paper also investigates the cinema buildings themselves, specifically those in Brighton and Hove, as a site of compressed historical narrative, and as an entry point for the writer of fiction.

## Introduction

This paper provides a critical account of the powerful and complex ways in which historical research can influence fiction. In this case, I will describe the impact of cinemagoing history on the content and form of my novel, *The Electric* (2020), which is built around the life and death of its central character, Daisy Seacombe, a wife of a Brighton policeman and film-fan born in the late 1920s. The archival responses of women cinemagoers in mid-century Britain allowed me to build an element of plausible dissent into an historical character who in early drafts seemed passively oppressed. In a formal sense, the fragmented and disrupted way in which films were consumed – due to the ‘rolling programmes’ of the period – also provided a potent metaphorical and structural device for the novel.

*The Electric* (2020) has a preoccupation with what David Lodge calls, “the construction of the real within the individual’s consciousness,” (2003: 49) but it also highlights the factors that disturb that construction. In cinemagoing history, we read of fantasies and disordered narratives, and the uncanny space of the picture house itself. In the later part of this paper, I will give an account of the compressed historical narratives present in the old cinema buildings of Brighton. All of these elements bring attention to the thin screen between reality and fiction, particularly in the remembered life.

The original inspiration for the character of Daisy came from an oral history article about 1930s police wives. Barbara Weinberger’s (1993) interviews revealed a group of women tethered to their husband’s profession, and I was drawn to descriptions of life on ‘police estates’, or ‘colonies’, where wives entered into social competition, the stakes of which might be their husband’s careers:

In Warwickshire, the Chief Constable would make an annual tour of inspection of police houses, to see that they were being kept up to the mark. Mrs Ellsworthy remembered how he would don a pair of white gloves and run his finger along the skirting board to see if it had been dusted.

(Weinberger 1993: 50)

The wives of policemen were subject to the same organizational structure as their husbands. Indeed, applicants for officer jobs were asked if they felt their wives would be “competent to uphold the standing and dignity of the rank” (Weinberger 1993: 50). Until the 1940s, brides of policemen were required to give up their employment, but often became unpaid labourers for the force.

Life on police estates, as described by Malcolm Young (1984), was oppressive. According to residents, talk on the estates revolved around “the interminable [subject] of who was doing well or who was doing badly” (Young 1984: 76). Those wives living in the communities which their husbands policed, found life just as hard, as shown by these remarks from a city police wife:

I could not leave my house for [the neighbours] shouting abuse at me and if they were near enough they spat on me. When I washed my steps...the children came and urinated on them – they also rubbed excreta on my doormat.

(Finch 1983: 40)

After reading these oral history narratives, it is perhaps unsurprising that early drafts presented Daisy – the police wife protagonist of *The Electric* – as trapped by her circumstances. Initial feedback described her as “a rather passive and reactive woman”, who is “irritating” and somewhat “flat” (Doloughan 2014). In attempting to write about the oppression of women in a particular time and place in English history, I had oppressed my central female character.

However, in researching what began as a minor detail of Daisy’s life – her frequent visits to the cinema – I found a surprising counter-culture with vibrant features of resistance. The history of cinemagoing – which is often an oral history – is full of women who express a critical response to their social and political surroundings. Amongst its many influences on *The Electric*, both formal and in terms of content, this thread of early to mid-twentieth century history gave me a plausible basis for introducing elements of dissent and independence into Daisy’s character.

## Cinemagoing of the 1930s and 40s: A Brief Introduction

In 1946, there were 1635 million cinema admissions in Britain (Corrigan 1983: 30). According to Box and Moss (quoted in Stacey 1994: 86), 70% of 1940s cinemagoers were working class, and many of them were women who reported attending up to four times per week.

There were many reasons for the popularity of cinema, but it is important to understand the relative physical luxury of the picture houses of the time. Cinemagoers of the 1940s consistently contrasted the luxury of the cinema with the hardship of their lives. “Sometimes,” as one respondent put it, “one went to keep warm if coal was short.” (Stacey 1994: 94)

In a post-war Britain where families often had no electricity, refrigerators or cars, the cinema was a cheap route to opulence: “For 1/9d we could enter another world. Oh the luxury of it, the red carpet, the wonderful portraits adorning the walls, the chandeliers hanging in the foyer and the smell!” (Stacey 1994: 95)

On first impression, one might imagine that the cinema was a place for glamour-starved young women to dream. Indeed, “glamour” and “romance” are words which frequently appear in the oral histories of cinemagoing. However, as I soon found out, those women did not watch films passively – they were, in fact, deeply engaged viewers, both politically, and in the co-creation of meaning. Through the retrospective oral histories of Annette Kuhn (2002) and Jackie Stacey (1994), and particularly through J L Mayer’s (1948) *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* – in which young women wrote about their cinema experiences at the time – we can draw an illuminating and surprising portrait of Daisy’s generation of film fans.

### Falling for Stars

Jackie Stacey’s (1994) audience study, collected in *Star Gazing*, is built around the remembrances of older women looking back on their cinema-going youth. Many of them speak of an obsessional love for a particular film star – one fan claims she went to see Doris Day in *Calamity Jane* (1953) 88 times. Fan clubs were common, and these organizations produced newsletters, and sometimes received

correspondence from the actors themselves. Interestingly, the fan clubs did not disband after the peak of the star’s fame, nor as the fans passed through their adolescence. Consider the words of film fan Pat Robinson, speaking in the 1990s of the longevity of the ‘Deanna Durbin Society’:

[Durbin] keeps in touch with us. Our meetings and our newsletters bring us all such a great deal of pleasure. I feel it quite extraordinary that Deanna can inspire such devotion, as it is now forty years since she made a film or any kind of public appearance.

(Stacey 1994: 140)

The enduring nature of the devotion already begins to indicate that the relationship between a cinemagoer of that time and a star could have some particular and surprising aspects. I tried to use the sources, here, as a model for the inner life of Daisy. In *The Electric*, Daisy continues a long and affectionate correspondence with an acquaintance in Canada, Paul, for several decades. Originally, I had wondered if that correspondence felt plausible, but, in fact, we can see above that the young film fans of the 1930s and 40s did not give up on the objects of their attention simply because they got older. When Paul continues to write to her, despite the brevity of their meeting during the war, Daisy wonders:

What kind of man... writes to a married woman on another continent, whom he barely knows? It wasn’t so outrageous to Daisy, of course. In his obsession, she recognized an element of her own character. When he’d written that he wondered what she was doing every minute of the day, that he designed whole evenings with her, whole holidays, well, hadn’t she had the same fantasies about certain film stars? As a girl, Daisy had never thought it ridiculous to imagine herself going around with Deanna Durbin or Bing Crosby. They were human, like her – they just had more make-up. Love was a new thing – it came from Hollywood, and nobody could teach her to settle for less.

(*The Electric*, draft, 2017)

Hollywood may have provided a model for passion and romance, but it was a characteristically enduring passion, and quite an idiosyncratic form of romance.

Hollywood stars provoked a range of feelings in the women who followed them, and whilst these included a romantic “swooning”, that was not the only response, and the nature of the emotions often seem to confuse the respondents themselves. Below, Pat Robinson feels obliged to make reference to her sexuality when describing the many years she devoted to Durbin:

I think that it would be considered a bit of a giggle today, if a large number of women confessed to feeling love for a girl. Nobody seemed to question it then. Just in case: I have been married since 1948! I have two sons and a daughter, one grandchild.

(Stacey 1994: 140)

There’s an anxiety present, over *where to put* these feelings. Indeed, obsessional relationships with movie stars are difficult to categorize, and may be variously interpreted as sexual, Platonic, or aspirational.

The obsessions seem to be divided fairly equally between male and female stars. The women writing in J. L. Mayer’s (1948) *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* contributed their “film-watching biographies” at the time of their peak cinema attendance. They had an awareness that their infatuation with certain stars didn’t quite fit within prescribed notions of desire. One fan, here, speaks of her feelings for Bing Crosby:

I think of him constantly; I wonder what his reactions are to certain news items...I wonder how his wife and kids are...I don’t pass out, but I feel completely limp when I hear him; relaxed and soothed...whether all that is love, I don’t know.

(Mayer 1948: 20)

The language is carefully considered, and reflective. There is a physical sensation, but it is far from the highly stimulated portrayal of the young fans of, say, Elvis Presley. Crosby inspires in her a sense of deep calm, of security. Notice, too, how she mentally inquires after the welfare of his wife and family – there is no sense of identification with, jealousy of, or mean-spiritedness towards the spouse.

At that time, of course, the decision to marry had a huge effect on the direction of a woman’s life. As I

found out in my research into police families, women were often “incorporated” (Finch 1983; Young 1984) into unpaid police work, or forced to move town at short notice. Given the profound weight attached to real-life romantic decisions, perhaps some of the pleasure of star-worship was to be found in what Elizabeth Bowen described as the “inoperative love” of fandom:

The delights of intimacy without the onus,  
high points of possession without the strain...  
Relationships in real life are made arduous by  
their reciprocities; one can too seldom sit back.

(Bowen 1937: 210)

In the relationship between Daisy and Paul, I tried to take a scenario with many of the facets of the star-gazer’s “inoperative love”, but then push it gradually into the “real lives” of the two characters. Methodologically, then, Daisy is the product of a reciprocal process between the creative reading of non-fiction accounts, and the creative writing of a character embedded in a novel. Remarking on this process brings attention to the “levels of reality” in *The Electric*: just as Daisy and Paul’s ‘real’ life is influenced and disrupted by their film-viewing, so my fictional portrayal of them is heavily guided by reading about the lived reality of cinemagoers.

### “Scenes Both Bright and Sordid”: Sexuality and Cinemagoing

A look at the responses of the young women in Mayer’s collection of cinemagoing biographies reveals other, deeper elements of the relationship between romance and film-watching. The “inoperative love” of fandom – with its newsletters and fashion influences – can sometimes seem passive – a wholesome admiration. These characteristics perhaps influenced the early drafts of *Daisy*. But as I explored the history of film attendance, I found that sex and the cinema were bound together in all sorts of complex ways.

It is well-known that the back-row seats of cinemas were armless, in order to facilitate the embraces of young couples. Jean Sheppard, responding to Stacey (1994: 86), said that “most of our courting was done in the pictures. It was the nearest thing to privacy any of us had in those days.”

Mayer’s subjects also reveal the way in which



cinema experiences could free up powerful sexual alternatives. If there is something chaste about the admiration of the Bing Crosby fan, above, there is no such quality present in one young respondent's reaction to a scene in Laurel and Hardy's comic version of *The Bohemian Girl* (1936), in which a gypsy girl is stripped, lashed to a post, and whipped:

That scene stimulated me a great deal and I would enact over and over again in the privacy of my own bedroom any scenes like that... of course I usually altered it so that I was not saved so promptly.

(Mayer 1948: 89)

This brilliant and thinly veiled description of sadomasochistic sexual practice is clearly the work of someone who is conscious of her own desires and sexual psychology. Such open descriptions of sexuality helped me to push Daisy away from more tentative early portrayals.

When we hold these predilections up against the qualities required to be a good police wife – the woman of “good character”, who provides a “clean, comfortable home” (Williams 1914) – we see a possible tension, ripe for exploration in fiction. With this research undertaken, I felt more comfortable in generating Daisy's scenes of dissent. This is evident when reviewing drafts of the novel. Many police wives spoke of the tendency of their husbands to bring interrogation practices into the home, when discussing daily life. A draft from 2014 shows my early attempts to capture this idea of Daisy being “questioned” by her husband:

If he asked her how her day was, then he needed to check that the logic of her movements made sense. “I didn't know the grocer's was open at nine,” he'd say. “When did you see Iris? I thought they were on holiday.” Sometimes he told her to sit down, and she would not feel the shock of the command until she was looking up at his chin.

(*The Electric*, draft, 2014)

As well as the sketched, summarized nature of the writing here, what's noticeable is that Daisy has no dialogue. She does not answer back, and the scene finishes with her unconsciously obeying Robert's command. An interim draft, from 2015, shows

the development of dialogue, but ends with Daisy diffusing the situation by initiating sexual contact (*The Electric*, draft, 2015).

In the final version of the interrogation scene, the end of which is included below, Daisy is much less passive:

“Sit down,” [Robert] said, as he himself rose. Daisy found herself seated, even before she'd registered the command. “Trevor and Iris Hook have gone to Suffolk, to see his family.” “Yes. They were packing when I left. What's your point?” “I am trying to account for your time.” “I'm not one of your villains, Robert. And I have a baby on my arm all day.” “He's not much of an obstacle.” “Is that the nicest thing you can say about your son?” “Don't be smart.” “I can't help being smart,” she said. “What's wrong with you, Robert? What's happened? You never used to be like this.” “Don't say that,” he said, gritting his teeth. “It's unkind. You're supposed to be on my side.” He stared beyond her, and then closed his eyes, but she saw the emotion flooding back into him. He walked away, sidling past the pram, hands in pockets. “Robert?” she called, but he opened the door and stepped out into the gale.

(*The Electric* 2020: 80)

Robert's command remains in this final draft, but there is a greater sense of parity in the dialogue, now. In fact, Daisy turns the interrogation back on Robert, who ends the scene somewhat crestfallen.

I also made Daisy a more active protagonist in the plot. A major strand of the novel follows her reaction as her husband is investigated by Scotland Yard, who believe him to be guilty of corruption. In the early drafts, the investigation breaks down because its leader, Inspector Lyle, takes pity on Daisy. In the final draft, however, it is Daisy who sabotages the investigation, by striking a deal with a key witness.

We can again see, here, how an engagement with sources across different disciplines can have practical implications for the fiction writer. In this case, my imaginative rewrite of Daisy inhabited a gap between two sources.

## The Material and Intellectual Influence of Film

From the various testimonies of cinemagoers of the period, we can see the range of subjects they enjoyed in the dark of the auditorium. But there is some evidence, too, of how the voracious consumption of films impacted their lives in both a material and intellectual way.

For example, whilst Hollywood is often credited with having influenced the popular conception of romance, being exposed to the heightened passions of the big screen could often generate a certain amount of comparative dissatisfaction in real life relationships. “I have finished some really very pleasant friendships,” said one woman, “because of this intangible longing for something different; something based, I suppose, on the very early idea of love.” (Mayer 1948: 84)

And this dissatisfaction was not restricted to the romantic sphere. Many of the women who regularly attended the cinema were working class, and it’s clear that exposure to the glamour of Hollywood caused restlessness. A 17-year-old typist states that she became “rather dissatisfied with my present existence and the neighbourhood in which I live.” Films, she said, made her “discontented with being poor.” (Mayer 1948: 55)

There is, of course, a more positive way of viewing this – as an awareness of broader horizons. The *concrete* effects that cinema had on the choices of the women who regularly watched films is striking. On several occasions, women wrote of films influencing their material life choices, especially vocationally. One trainee nurse cites *The Lamp Still Burns* (1943) as propelling her towards her career. In fact, that film is credited more than once with awakening an interest in nursing. Also, in Mayer (1948: 84), a 22-year-old clerk says that seeing Tyrone Power in *The Mark of Zorro* (1940) inspired her to learn Spanish, which in turn led to a career in the travel industry. The influence, there, is stark and direct.

Cinemagoing influenced the politics and worldview of the women in Mayer’s book, too. The way they wrote about films shows that they considered the medium seriously and critically. One respondent, at only 19 years old, gives a damning verdict on *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939),

which, she believes, pandered to gender norms. To foreground Elizabeth I’s romantic interests, she says, was “nonsense! Elizabeth loved only herself; she may have liked lovers to satisfy her vanity but she would have sacrificed everything she loved for the throne and power.” (Mayer 1948: 68) This sort of engagement with film – politicized, analytical, and feminist – is far removed from the idea of 1940s cinemagoing as light escapism.

Such a review is extremely helpful to a fiction writer portraying a woman of that era. A writer could easily take the dominant source - in this case *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) - as a guide to marital relationships of the period. Daisy became a more liberated and textured character as a result of this reading.

There is a sense, here, in which Daisy’s cinemagoing gives her a consciousness of her predicament. David Foster Wallace (1997) believed that watching serious films “renders us more ‘conscious’”, and that phenomenon is very much present in the writings of the young women in Mayer. A 21-year-old chemist’s assistant, who penned long letters after her cinema visits, puts it well, by way of a conclusion: “In my opinion, the world is half asleep,” she writes (Mayer 1948: 80). Films and cinemagoing, were, for me, a way of waking Daisy.

## Murkier Mystery – How Cinemagoing shaped The Electric

In the previous section, I showed how the history of cinemagoing allowed me to provide narrative “alternatives” for Daisy, a character whom history might consider to have been oppressed. It provided examples of how cinemagoing women of her generation might have broadened the scope of their lives and resisted the limitations of traditional gender roles. In short, cinemagoing history gave me access to Daisy’s interiority. Alongside this, a closer look at the actual experience of going to the cinema throughout the early and middle part of the twentieth century revealed some interesting ways in which cinemagoers dealt with and exploited narrative interference.

These disturbances, some of which I will describe in detail throughout the remainder of this paper, include: censorship, mechanical failure, the oddities of the rolling programme, and the intrusion of “real life” into the cinema space. They all contributed to the central concerns of my novel, particularly

the essential question: how can we use narrative to make sense of our lives, when it is often so heavily disrupted?

### Out of Order: the Effects of Rolling Programmes

The modern cinemagoer typically buys a ticket for a single screening of one film. They arrive shortly before the feature begins, and – if it is sufficiently entertaining – they leave when it ends. Up until the 1960s, this was not the case. Before then, films were shown on a “rolling programme” – a repeated loop of news reels, short films, and a major feature, rounded off by the national anthem (Stacey 1994). The viewer purchased a ticket for a seat rather than a screening. They turned up whenever they saw fit and left when they liked. Theoretically, they could watch the full programme multiple times on one admittance. If we think back to the Doris Day fan who claimed to have watched *Calamity Jane* (1953) 88 times, we can probably assume that this was possible because she saw the film several times *per daily sitting*. The rolling programme also meant that an audience member might enter the auditorium in the middle of a film, watch the ending first, and then eventually catch up with its opening when the programme rolled around again. This situation led to a radically different way of watching and understanding film narratives.

In his short essay, “A Cinema-goer’s Autobiography”, Italo Calvino (1990: 40) writes with great beauty about his youth in the 1930s, when he attended the cinema “maybe even twice a day.” He gives perhaps the most lucid account of the effects of the rolling programme. His description of the strange joy of narrative disruption deserves to be quoted at length:

Watching the beginning of the film after one had already seen the end offered additional pleasures: that of discovering not the resolution of the film’s mysteries and dramas but their genesis; and that of a confused sense of premonition vis-à-vis the characters. Confused: in precisely the way a clairvoyant’s must be, since the reconstruction of the mangled plot was not always easy, and would be even less so if it happened to be a detective story, where the identification first of the murderer and then of the crime left an even murkier area of mystery in the middle. What’s more, there would sometimes be a bit missing between the beginning and the end, since suddenly

looking at my watch I’d realise I was late and that if I didn’t want to incur my parents’ wrath I’d have to leave before the sequence I’d come in at reappeared on the screen. So that many films were left with a hole in the middle, and even today, after thirty years – what am I saying? – almost forty, when I find myself watching one of those old films – on television for example – I’ll recognise the moment I walked into the cinema, the scenes I watched without understanding, and I’ll retrieve the lost pieces and complete the puzzle as if I’d left it unfinished only the day before.

(Calvino 1990: 40-41)

Daisy herself has this same film experience in *The Electric* when she first meets Paul Landry during a screening of *Casablanca* (1943). She enters the auditorium in time to see the film’s denouement first, and finds it confusing and unremarkable. As the film begins again, she is distracted by Paul interpreting the film into French for his colleague (another disruption). During the quiet middle of the film, Daisy begins to understand the climax, and is emotionally overwhelmed by the cascading realizations she has.

The ending caught up with her halfway through the film. The deepest part of her mind must have made the connection between the events unfolding on screen, and the conclusion she’d seen over an hour earlier. It hit her with force, and she began to cry, quietly.

(*The Electric* 2020: 68)

This portrayal of strange temporal sequencing was what I intended to mimic in the narrative ordering of *The Electric*. In the novel, Daisy’s life is presented in a way which replicates the looped programme, beginning after her death in 1987, and then vaulting back to the 1930s, and the early days of her marriage, in chapter two. After that, the two time frames proceed, in opposite temporal directions, towards the “murkier area of mystery in the middle”, which is her death. The task of piecing the narrative together is undertaken primarily by Daisy’s daughter, Linda, who attempts to reread her late mother’s life by tracking down Paul Landry. Linda learns to read a life in the way Daisy watched films.

## Outside Intrusions

Calvino also writes poetically about the difficult spatial duality of the cinema. Just as there are (at least) two time frames for the cinemagoer – the couple of hours in which they sit before the screen, and the (typically compressed, and potentially disrupted) diegetic time of the film – there are also at least two spaces.

When it rained in the film, I would listen hard to hear whether it had started raining outside too, whether I had been surprised by a downpour, having left home without an umbrella: it was the only moment when, while still immersed in that other world, I remembered the world outside; and it made me anxious. Even today, rain in films triggers the same reaction, a sense of anxiety.

(Calvino 1990: 42)

The oral history of cinemagoing is full of such synchronicity and divergence between the space of the cinema, and the space of the film. In *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing* (Breakwell and Hammond 1990), there are many examples. One contributor relates an anecdote in which a bird got into the auditorium during a showing of *The Birds* (1963), where it was duly killed by a screaming woman – a tale which seems a little too “on the nose” for fiction. During war-time, one can imagine the existential adjustments required when fictional war films were preceded by newsreels of actual war events. Indeed, one cinemagoer slips between associations, here:

The Twentieth Century Fox logo always made me think we were about to see a war film, as the searchlights that had woken us in London in the blitz always preceded an air raid.

(Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 60)

On the surface, that seems like a simple comparison, but it is fascinating to look closely at the levels of deferral there: the searchlights of the *logo* remind the viewer of the real searchlights of the blitz, and this triggers the expectation that he will see a *fictional* war film.

Narrative disruption could also be caused by the

perfectly mundane intrusion of real-life, as in this response from a projectionist: “People would ring up and say, ‘Can you get Mrs So-and-So, her baby’s crying and I can’t stop her.’ So you’d write a carbon-backed slide with this message and project it over the film. And then you’d hear scurrying feet in the cinema.” (Breakwell and Hammond 1990: 53) So, domestic realities could intrude, in quite a literal way, into the fantasy, adventure, and romance of the fictional world.

The cinema is a liminal space between fantasy and reality, the conscious and unconscious mind. It’s an uncanny place. Calvino (1990: 44) describes “the colour of the air outside” appearing “discreetly at the threshold” after a film had finished, and how cinemagoers would look at each other uneasily, “as though facing an intrusion equally inconvenient to both.”

The membrane between the cinema, the film, and real life is consistently returned to in cinemagoing history, and it is extremely pertinent to the writer of narrative fiction. When we engage deeply with a fictional narrative form, its shape influences the way we tell the stories of our lives. Some fictional content can slip through alongside the fictional form. The line between fantasy and reality becomes blurred.

In his book *The Remembered Film* (2010), Victor Burgin outlines an oral history project about memory undertaken in Provence, in which sociologists “found an almost universal tendency for personal history to be mixed with recollections of scenes from films... ‘I saw at the cinema’ would become simply, ‘I saw’” (2010: 67). Burgin picks out one striking example:

A woman speaks of her experiences as a child amongst refugees making the hazardous journey from the north of France down to Marseille. She recalls the several occasions when the column of refugees in which she was travelling were strafed by German aircraft. In recounting these memories she invokes a scene from René Clement’s film of 1952, *Jeux Interdits*, in which a small girl in a column of refugees survives an air attack in which her parents are killed. The woman’s speech, however, shifts between the first and third person in such a way that it is unclear whether she is speaking of herself or of the character in the film.

(Burgin 2010: 68)

We can see, in the case above, how fictional film scenes fill the space left by a repressed memory. There is clearly “narrative disruption” here, but the relationship between film, reality, and memory is so convoluted that it’s hard to say which way the disruption runs. It was, in fact, this sort of disruption and convolution that I wanted to explore in my fiction: Daisy seeks the sustenance of film’s fantasy life to resist the difficulties of her domestic situation, and her life eventually resembles the romances she enjoys. When her cinema experience is disrupted by the peculiarities of the rolling programme, she finds joy and liberation in the re-ordering of the story.

Calvino (1990: 45), when writing of the glitzy fantasy of Hollywood film, said that he “never took it as truth, but just as one of the many artificial images possible.” Cinema (and fiction) is not about a moral distinction between the evil untruths of fantasy and the righteousness of reality; it is about providing a space for *alternatives*. It is a chance to have *both*. Cinemagoing gives Daisy – like the real women on whom she is based – ways to resist the iniquities of her domestic life, without abandoning it. Some of those possibilities for cinema-going women were quite tangible – fashion ideas, the motivation to pursue a career or learn a language. Some of them were intellectual – cinema offered an engagement with an often complex cultural form. Some of the possibilities were deeper and more ephemeral – such as the opening up of sexual fantasies and romantic alternatives. Whilst these may seem, on the surface, to have offered less material change, my fictional representation of Daisy suggests that fantasy can often have a very real effect on life choices. Her correspondence with Paul Landry becomes a real and powerful friendship when he moves to England, and she keeps this relationship separate from her domestic life.

### **The Site of the Picture Palace**

Much of the appeal of cinemagoing, for the researcher as well as the respondent, lies in the magnificence of the cinema buildings. In oral histories, one observes a move away from statistical approaches, and towards remembered sensual details, which is just the sort of access that a fiction writer needs. One oral history respondent gives an almost impressionistic description of the Brighton cinemas of her youth:

On Wednesday afternoons, my father’s half day, in the winter, we always went to the pictures. In the Regent, they had budgerigars all alongside in a wire enclosure. We also had tea and toast on a tray, which must have been really dangerous as we had to pass the trays of tea along rows of people.

(Riley, Payne, and Flood 2009: 59),

Pictures and reminiscences from the 1930s and 1940s give a sense of spaces which were suitably ornamented for the production of fantasy.

After authoring two novels rooted very much in the 25-year experience of living in my home county of Derbyshire (Hogan 2008, 2011), *The Electric* is the first literary novel I have written about Brighton and Sussex, where I have lived since 2008. That situation presented many challenges. A fiction writer can’t hope to encapsulate a whole city and its history in one novel. By focusing on the cinemas, I had a way of dividing the space of the city, and its past, into manageable areas.

The rapid demise of cinemagoing as the premier form of popular entertainment naturally led to the closing of many of Brighton and Hove’s cinemas. The years between 1950 and 1958 saw a decline of 641 million cinema attendances in Britain, and the consequent closure of many venues. (Corrigan 1983: 30) In 1946, there were 13 cinemas in Brighton and Hove, but by 1986 only three remained.

Focusing on the sites enabled me to read the history of the city compressed into the buildings themselves. I could trace the history of a cinema from its inception, through its various names and guises, through its modernisation and disrepair, to its closure or repurposing. I could also sometimes see the building today, often in a new form.

For example, the site of the Odeon Kemptown on the corner of St George’s Road and Paston Place was originally owned by the Sassoon family, who kept stables there. In September 1940 the cinema was struck by a bomb from a German plane pursued by Spitfires and attempting to lighten its load in order to hasten the retreat. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the cinema was running its regular “Mickey Mouse Club”. Several children were amongst the dead. The defiant atmosphere of the time meant that the

Odeon was rebuilt within three months. By 1980 it was a bingo hall, and in 1983 became a social welfare centre run by the Bethany Fellowship, before being demolished to make way for flats, as Kemptown became the affluent liberal centre it is now (Riley, Payne, and Flood 2009: 51-53). Narrative time appears compressed; the linear history is embodied – spatialized by the site of the cinema.

The old cinema buildings of Brighton tell a story of how British people spent their leisure time through the eras. The layers of history are visible. Even in the 1940s, sharp-eyed patrons of the Academy Cinema could spot the Moorish designs that harked back to the building's time as a Turkish baths called "The Brighton Hammam" (Riley, Payne and Flood 2009). The Savoy, too, had been a bathhouse, and several of the cinemas became bingo halls when the movie craze passed.

When visiting the old cinema buildings, I found myself struck by the physical clues about their pasts. The Savoy, on which *The Electric Theatre* in my novel is loosely based, still has its seafront entrance. I collected some of the tiles which dropped from its tired façade after a recent storm. The foyer now leads into a casino. On the East Street side, the building is home to a strip club. I was moved to read a former employee's description of the cinema's final years:

It was a lovely old building. It had gone to rot, though. The main ballroom upstairs was still there, but the ceiling had partially collapsed and it was inhabited by pigeons. The huge number one screen had been closed for years, but the beautiful old silk curtains, enormous amounts of fabric, slightly tattered, were still hanging there. I remember thinking what a terrible waste it was.

(Riley, Payne and Flood 2009: 68)

I wanted to convey that sense of compression, simultaneity, and the fetishization of the buildings that I found in the oral histories, in the finale of Daisy and Paul's story. In order to do that, I changed the narrative pace, and the decades leading up to Daisy's death are summarised around the closures:

The West Street Odeon shut in 1973, along with the Regent. Daisy told Paul that one of her first memories was the sight of a German fighter

plane positioned as if crashing into the canopy, as part of the promotion for a Jean Harlow film. She told him about the budgerigars in the foyer and the shining steel teapots, how she'd danced on the sprung-floor of the ballroom upstairs.

That next year, they stood on that same street, an arm's length between them, and watched the Academy pulled apart, layer by layer. The crumbling art deco interior gave way to the Moorish tiles of the old bathhouse.

"Eventually," Paul said, "we're going to have to find something else to do with our time."

"Not until they pull the last one down," Daisy said. "They'll have to drag me out of my seat."

(*The Electric* 2020: 267)

The closure of the cinemas throughout the 60s, 70s and 1980s are a threat to Daisy and Paul's friendship, and to the spirit which made it possible. As well as literally compromising their ability to meet by restricting their choice of safe venues, the closures figuratively mirror the demise of the cinema-inspired 'fantasy' romance that they brought into being.

### **The Pleasure of Disruption**

The closures of Brighton's cinemas throughout the latter half of the twentieth century contribute to a dark chapter in Daisy's life, and pre-empt the unspooling of her relationship with Paul. They cause disruption on a grand and conclusive scale. However, this paper has attempted to show that – in general – narrative disruption is not always an entirely negative element of the reading/viewing experience. Often, we assume that disruption is experienced passively, and causes only frustration. A modern film audience may find it unsatisfactory to miss the beginning of a film, or see it in the wrong order, but for Daisy these disruptions become an opportunity for creative engagement. She – and the women on whom she is based – learned to master the skills required to manipulate and control the disruptions in narrative, in films, in language, in memory, and in real life. The breakdown in narrative allowed her to exercise a certain agency over the stories she consumed, and she then took this power into her own life to resist oppression, and change her story.

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## About the Author

**Edward Hogan** is a lecturer in Creative Writing at The Open University. He has written five novels, including *Blackmoor* (2008), winner of the Desmond Elliott Prize, and *The Hunger Trace* (2011), which was shortlisted for the Encore Award and the Portico Prize. He is from Derby, and now lives in Brighton. *The Electric* is published by John Murray, in 2020.





# Taking Liberties

Ideals of freedom in contemporary South Africa:  
a practice-based approach to research with  
multilingual writing communities

Graham Mort

## ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on a Leverhulme Foundation-funded research project, Taking Liberties, which took place at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, from January to May 2018. The paper will trace some antecedents for this multilingual Creative Writing project, drawing out methodological practices that informed its design and implementation. It will trace the engagement with students at the University of the Western Cape in the context of historical and contemporary political conditions. Outputs from the project will be featured and discussed in terms of text and performance. Links will be provided to web-based outputs to create an interactive dimension. My discussion of the project will reflect upon the nature of practice-based research in Creative Writing and the wider implications for the discipline and its inter-disciplinary capacity.

(Photograph by Graham Mort with participants' permission provided)

This paper will focus on a Leverhulme Foundation-funded research project, *Taking Liberties*, which took place at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa, from January to May 2018. That project had its roots in an earlier multilingual project, *Homecoming*, that I carried out at UWC in April 2014, where the methodology reaches even further back to my multilingual work on the Preston Peace Garden with the Harris Museum in 1991. The *Crossing Borders* and *Radiophonics* projects (British Council, Mort 2001-2009) in sub-Saharan Africa also form methodological antecedents, whilst the AHRC-funded *Moving Manchester* project (Pearce, Crawshaw and Mort 2004-6) consolidated those in a UK setting. An ethnographic project with Kurdish women, *Many Women, Many Words*, carried out in Kurdistan with the University of Soran, forms another point of reference through its establishment of research archives, a translation process and outcomes that are practice-based rather than formally analytical. My intention is to show how these tributary projects shaped the methodology of *Taking Liberties* and led to web and print-based research outputs through a process that was open-ended and exploratory and that resisted an analytical outcome in favour of a polyphonic heterogeneity.

I also want to focus on the realities of running practice-based research projects, on their inherent and perhaps inevitable methodological impurity, where unforeseen events disrupt the most careful planning process, where human relations form part of the tissue of that research and where, by its very nature, that research may seem more of a partially-realized and open-ended process than black-boxed model in which inputs and outputs have been measured in a way that can then be subject to a totalizing analysis.

In April 2015 the first international *Writing for Liberty* conference was held at Lancaster University under the auspices of CTWR (Centre for Transcultural Writing and Research 2005 - ). Our intention was to explore writing – creative, critical and hybrid forms – that had been used to defend or extend the notion of human liberty through its resistance to dominant cultures or regimes that might threaten any perceived aspect of human freedom. Our method was that creative writers, critics and theorists could participate in the same discussion panels. Our broader aim was that the conference would be held biennially and would

move between Lancaster and other global locations. Accordingly, in April 2017, the second *Writing for Liberty* conference was held at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town, hosted by the University of the Western Cape through the auspices of Meg Vandermerwe and *UWC Creates* (University of the Western Cape, 2009 -), an offshoot of the Creative Writing programme at UWC committed to outreach exploration and the publication of new writing from Cape Town communities in Xhosa, English and Afrikaans. The most recent *Writing for Liberty* conference was held in April 2019 at the Universidad Nacional De San Martín in Buenos Aires.

Meg Vandermerwe had been my PhD student at Lancaster University and was keen to maintain the connection to CTWR at Lancaster and extend the work she had been developing at UWC with writers Sindiwe Magona and Antjie Krog. Antjie was the keynote speaker for the 2017 Cape Town conference, which attracted delegates from across South Africa, as well as Uganda, South America and the UK. CTWR played a supporting role in programming the conference. In my case, this was also an extension of my role as an Extraordinary Professor at UWC, a visiting professorship that had been conferred in 2014 when I made an extended visit to UWC to write and teach there for six weeks. During that period of residence in 2014, a general election was under way and I was struck by a statistic that appeared during the weeks when the African National Congress (ANC) fought to win another term of office against an emergent opposition: less than a third of all “born free” South Africans (those born since the ending of Apartheid in 1994) had even registered to vote (Smith 2014).

I made an application to the Leverhulme Foundation for an International Academic Fellowship in 2016. This had twin aims: to work and teach in the Creative Writing Department at UWC for three months and to explore notions of liberty in a multilingual project that would deploy practice-based creative writing methodologies to explore concepts and expressions of liberty in contemporary South Africa. It was felicitous that I heard that this bid had been successful when attending the 2017 *Writing for Liberty* conference in Cape Town and I attended to the ongoing debates there with renewed sense of engagement. Those debates – about who speaks for whom in South Africa and how – became daunting in their ferocity as successive layers

of history were peeled from a core of grievance, disenfranchisement and appropriation.

Before entering academia in 2001, I worked as a freelance writer in education. In the late 80s I had been involved in the *Pavement Project* at Carlton Bolling Secondary School in Bradford. The poems of pupils at the school were inscribed into paving stones in the city centre, using both English and Urdu scripts. This had come about through the simple expedient of asking children who could write in their mother-tongue to do so. The results were striking both in terms of content and calligraphy. When commissioned to create the text for the Preston Peace Garden by the Harris Museum in 1991, I worked with a group of English-speaking local writers, but also a group of Asian women whose English-language skills were limited. Aided by a local GP, Susheila Berma, who acted as an intermediary, I guided that group, working in Urdu, Hindi and English to create a hybrid poem that never existed in any single language, though it was subsequently translated into Gujarati. The group had a terrific ethos of mutual support and moments in the construction of the poem were often accompanied by spontaneous applause. It was a moving and hugely engaging experience but most importantly of all, it taught me that I didn't have to control the writing workshop environment and that I could work in languages shared by participant writers but not by me. I didn't have to be an expert when my project participants were the experts. The poem became a public artwork and is still visible in the Peace Garden on Fishergate in Preston town centre.

The germ of that concept stayed with me and was re-deployed in 2005 when I worked with a group of pan-African writers to create the collaborative poem "Sing Like A River" at the *Beyond Borders Festival* that I helped to create and programme in Kampala (British Council, 2005). The poem was both a multilingual work and a metaphorical celebration of multilinguism itself:

I learned to sing like a river  
babble like water  
then foreign tongues  
broke over my head.

These tales, these streams flowing  
into unknown rivers  
meet at the sea of familiarity  
telling the strains of ancestry.  
("Sing Like a River" 2005)

Then in 2014, during my first stay at UWC in Cape Town, I worked multilingually with a group of English, Xhosa and Afrikaans speaking students to create individual poems and a performance poem, "Homecoming", that explored themes of longing and belonging in which language itself formed a sense of location. Again, it was the expertise and cooperation of the group that helped that work to emerge, as phrases in all languages were deployed, examined, discussed and integrated into the emergent work.

The notion of the collaborative poem seemed to offer an alternative to the Western concept of individual composition, contradicting notions of the lone writer whose inspirational genius had borne canonical fruit. In Africa, where traditions of orality are still strong, the collaborative process of composition seemed to offer a more democratic – even traditional – method of evolving a text to which individuals had contributed, in the same way that the work of a *griot* had evolved over centuries. The issue of ownership becomes blurred into the creative process and the sense of working together with language, dialect and idiolect offers a new kind of synthesis.

During this period of project development through my own action-research, some important developments were taking place in the academic landscape of Higher Education in the UK. Undergraduate courses were being developed at many universities, obversely so in institutions like Lancaster, where the first Creative Writing courses had been MA courses, meaning postgraduate provision preceded undergraduate developments. A growing number of MA graduates had also led to the desire for progression, hence the development of new practice-based PhD programmes in Creative Writing. At Lancaster University Creative Writing PhD numbers grew from three to 30 in a ten-year period. At the same time, the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) was working with the Quality Assurance Association to develop benchmarks for Creative Writing that saw it recognized as an independent academic subject. This process was preceded by the development of NAWE's own Research Benchmarks, meant to guide the development and ethos of postgraduate study. Whilst formal methods of research and analytical reflection were built into those principles, so was a recognition that creative methods could also be used as a form of affective reflection. At Lancaster a number of my own doctoral students (Ray Robinson, Rhiannon Hoosan, Naomi Kruger) had integrated

elements of creative writing into their reflective theses (a prose vignette and a fictional interview, prose poems, and a stage script, respectively) to show that focused creative perspectives could illuminate the wider creative strategies of their doctoral submissions.

In a number of projects in the UK or in sub-Saharan Africa (*Moving Manchester, Crossing Borders, Radiophonics*) I worked to put writers – their writing, cultural backgrounds and creative processes – at the centre of interest, building online galleries that profiled them. *Moving Manchester* led to an academic study, *Postcolonial Manchester* (Crawshaw, Fowler and Pearce 2013) whilst my own contribution created an alternative method: building unmediated platforms in the form of a Writers Gallery for Manchester's migrant writers where they could post their creative work and discuss its origins and significance in relation to the project's wider agendas. Since these writers had been considered regional and liminal in the national literary scene, I was keen to create a method that was contrapuntal but complementary to “literary anthropology”, that could maximize the writers' own agency, creating a rich and even contradictory polyphony.

Behind some of these strategies was a somewhat troubled relationship with the way Creative Writing related to critical and theoretical studies of literature that were far more firmly established in the academy. There was a sense that Creative Writing was the new kid on the block (just as English studies had seemed at the turn of the 20th century) and that its practices lacked rigour and legitimacy. There is some truth in the recognition that Creative Writing had to move from charismatic teaching models to more thoroughly grounded pedagogic practice. But the argument that new creative writing, which almost by definition creates or reconfigures forms of knowledge and understanding, had to be subordinate to formal exegesis seemed patently inauthentic. Yet this principle was reinforced whenever the Research Excellence Framework exercise audited our outputs and creative writers were asked to supply a critical accompaniment explaining their work as research.

In 2013, I was asked to help design and implement a new research project in Kurdistan, where one of my ex-PhD students, Muli Amaye, was teaching at the University of Soran. Established as a semi-autonomous province of Iran after the 1992 Gulf war, Kurdistan represented a homeland for Kurds

in the region as well as a symbolic cultural locus for the world's biggest displaced ethnic group. Saddam Hussein had infamously carried out a genocide – *Al Anfal* – against the Kurdish people in the 1980s and 1990s destroying over 4,000 villages, imprisoning or killing the political opposition and forcing the migration of many others into Syria, Turkey and Iran. Whilst the Kurdish media celebrated the contribution of Kurdish women Peshmerga fighters, the experience of women who had fled Kurdistan to protect their children was not highlighted and yet seemed to represent a remarkable act of resistance and resilience. Muli had met a number of these older women and wanted to build a research archive of their stories so that they could be understood by a younger generation of the Kurdish population.

I made visits to Kurdistan in 2013 and 2014, flying from Manchester to Erbil and being driven through miles of disused agricultural land and mountains still scarred by de-forestation to reach the city of Soran. There, we trained a group of young English-speaking researchers in interview methods and in an ethical research process that had been approved by Lancaster University. Fourteen women were identified through a network of connections spreading out from Soran to Rawanduz, Erbil and other towns. They were interviewed in Kurdish, their words transcribed and then translated through a complex and multi-layered process to ensure accuracy. In addition, those who agreed to be photographed were featured with an object that had been precious to them for some reason during their displacement. A shared website was built to house the images and the narratives in Kurdish and English so that our work took the form of an ethnographic resource. In the later stages of the project, Islamic State forces threatened Erbil and carried out a new genocide against the Yazidi people. We went back to the women, anxious that some of their accounts might endanger them if Kurdistan was overrun. None of the women wanted to withdraw their stories or images from the website.

By 2016 we had achieved our primary objective of gathering and featuring multilingual versions of the stories on a Kurdish women's stories website, *Many Women, Many Words*, but we were also aware that an archive of transcripts fell short of our original vision for the project in terms of its potential reach. We were neither sociologists nor anthropologists, so the answer seemed to lie in our own expertise as creative writers. By this time the security situation

in Iraq had deteriorated, with Islamic State forces converging on Erbil and massacring Yazidi populations. Accordingly, Muli and I rendezvoused in a writing centre owned by Manchester's Commonword organization near Bergerac in rural France. We brought transcripts of all fourteen interviews and read them intensively. It was clear that there were common thematic threads in all: childhood, working the land, marriage, education, the war, exile, future and return. We marked lines in each interview with marker pens and then cut them out with scalpels, assembling the first rough draft of a performance poem almost at random, then progressively refining the poem whilst trying never to change the women's original wording. A draft of the poem, intended for several voices was then typed up and submitted to our researchers in Kurdistan who checked it for narrative sequentiality, cultural content and historical coherence, guiding us through several iterations. The poem was installed on the project website, translated back into Kurdish, and later performed back to those older women by a group of younger project participants in Soran.

It was at the *Writing for Liberty* conference in Cape Town in 2017, that the poem was first performed. The performers comprised five black women from South Africa, the US and the UK, directed by theatre specialist, Delia Meyer. The performance took place at the end of the first day of papers and panel presentations. The significance of a work dealing with exile, expatriation and oppression was not lost on South Africans and by the end of that performance the performers and audience members were visibly affected. Just as a debate began about the ethics of appropriation, a Kurdish woman from the local expatriate community stood up and through her tears announced, "But this is my story!" It seemed a resounding vindication of our research method, showing that its results could be highly affective as well as historically accurate in its exploration of events at a particular time and place. Performance had become the vector for complex personal and historical circumstances in which poetry was simultaneously a narrative and reflective medium, bearing witness across cultures through its recognizably human dimensions of suffering, anger, love and redemption.

I would argue, too, that just as silence contributes to the structure of music, there were silences at the heart of the Kurdish women's narratives that became increasingly significant. Although one woman gave

an account of an honour killing, there were no direct accounts of sexual aggression or abuse. Given the sexual exploitation of Yazidi women in the region in 2016, the long historical association between military and sexual conquest and the vulnerability of the women at the time of their migrations this became an increasingly significant silence for me. One might even say that the women's stories were narratives built around that silence, an intractable sense of grief that was impossible for them to share. So, their way of telling was also perhaps a way of not telling, an act of withholding that was nonetheless deeply communicative.

The research projects listed earlier have led to outputs contributed by their participants: polyphonic accounts of their experience without mediation, explanation or interpretation. Most of them were followed by a more formal academic papers and most, like this one, formed a reflective account of the methodological process. In Kurdistan I kept a notebook and took hundreds of photographs, partly to add content and context to the website we were building, but also as a personal resource relating to my own experience. Instead of formal analytical reflection, I created a research log tracking the project and my journey into and out of the region that took the form of twenty loose-form sonnets. These allowed me to create a narrative of my experience of the project, albeit one pitted with methodological lacunae, and one that allowed the play of a subjective irony and scepticism in relation to my own activities in Kurdistan. I was intensely aware that my presence at some interviews may have affected the narratives (those silences) that the women related. The poems, through their essentially reflective nature allowed a kind of self-interrogation, an emotional sense of scale, and a reciprocal narrative gift. The poems were published in their entirety in *The Long Poem Magazine* with a short introduction to offer context (Mort 2018).

I left the *Writing for Liberty* conference in 2017 knowing that I was to return in a few months' time to embark on a project, that had begun to seem increasingly presumptuous. A number of fierce debates, including a publicly contested, even hostile, response to Antjie Krog's reconciliatory keynote address had begun to reveal the vulnerability of my position. After almost eighteen years of working across sub-Saharan Africa in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, I was beginning to feel a new sense of my own "white privilege" in a political and

cultural climate of brutal historical complexity which reached from the suppression of the indigenous Khoi and San peoples to the Apartheid era and subsequent outbreaks of xenophobic violence against migrants from Zimbabwe and other African countries.

When I arrived back in Cape Town in January 2018 it was to an almost frenzied sense of political and social turmoil: president Jacob Zuma was deposed a few days after my arrival (with 75 corruption charges pending); Winnie Mandela died and was immediately rehabilitated (even sanctified) despite her controversial and contested political record; there were outbreaks of violent civil unrest in many regions following the non-delivery of health and social housing services; a national transport strike became entrenched; business entrepreneurs, the Gupta brothers, were being pursued on corruption charges; Patricia de Lille, mayor of Cape Town, was suspended because of corruption allegations. Every night SABC news brought forward new allegations and instances of political and financial corruption. Levels of sexual violence were reportedly at a historical high, and there were many instances of gun crime – from turf wars between taxi drivers to the kidnapping and summary execution of police officers in the Eastern Cape. In addition, the worst drought in Cape Town for 100 years was in progress, bringing the prospect of serious civil unrest to the city and its townships. Working in this context seemed a daunting prospect.

Once I had engaged with staff and students at UWC, we set up a weekly *Taking Liberties* creative writing workshop, which we advertised around the campus through the Creative Writing staff and email announcement. Whilst planning the project in the UK, I had developed an ethical framework for the project, approved by the ethics committee at Lancaster University. This aspect of the project required me to ask all project participants to sign an ethical permissions form which granted me the use of photographic images, sound recordings and written work which students submitted to the project. As part of the ethical process, these submissions were subsequently read and reviewed by each participant, prior to being posted on the *Taking Liberties* website.

Attendance at the weekly workshop was problematic, as I had anticipated it would be, with a number of core (weekly attending) participants and a number of “floating” participants who attended more

randomly. Although such matters might seem trivial in the scheme of South African politics, the lack of a critical mass of attending students proved to be one of the most difficult aspects of my work at UWC. Course commitments, teaching duties, statutory holidays and a national transport strike played their part, as did the interventions of paid work for part-time students and personal issues for others. Any strategically incremental approach risked leaving non-attendees behind as the workshops moved forward. The ethical permissions form in itself proved to be a difficult enterprise and just sending out and getting back signed copies agreeing to the underlying conditions of the project was a major obstacle and risked the perception that what should have been a background activity underwriting the project was actually instrumental to my aims in a major way.

A number of activities went on in parallel: my own weekly workshop, MA workshops with Professors Kobus Moolman and Michael Wessells, personal interviews with PhD students and occasional one-off workshops with students from other departments. The weekly workshops formed the core of my activity and my intention was both to create new website featuring individual writers (photograph, profiles, examples of their writing, publications) and build a new collaborative work. We began our workshops by looking at the rhetoric of freedom, reading an anonymized list of quotations relating to liberty from key political and social activities in the past two hundred years. For participants, it proved impossible to distinguish Joseph Stalin from Nelson Mandela, Adolf Hitler from Thomas Paine, Hillary Clinton from Mahatma Gandhi (see Appendix 1). In fact, the best clues to who might have said what were stylistic ones derived from the historical period of their utterance, or from circumstantial clues contained in the quotations. What emerged was a sense that notions of liberty had always been a vector for proposed political or social change, that liberty itself was a promiscuous notion that had many bedfellows. This perception that the rhetoric of liberty was allied to the appropriation of power was clearly heightened by the political rhetoric that was being voiced throughout the South African political scene, as well as the recognition that all sides in the Apartheid struggle had used violence to pursue ideals of freedom. This had left a legacy of repressed guilt and moral contradiction that even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, instituted after the fall of Apartheid, had failed to redress.

From the outset, creative work produced in the weekly workshop was multilingual in the sense that many expressions in the participants' work were rendered into Xhosa or Afrikaans since some significant indigenous idioms or words seemed untranslatable to English. Once a degree of linguistic fluidity had been established in the workshops, I actively solicited formulations expressing liberty in English, Xhosa and Afrikaans. By this time, I had established an email group that was much bigger than the attendance at each weekly workshop and was able to draw upon this wider linguistic pool for contributions to my word-choard. Whilst the initial emphasis in the workshops was on individual work, sometimes linked to the other study modules of students, I was carefully moving the group towards a collaborative effort which would be realized after the Easter break, during which I would return to the UK for a few days.

At that point, the clock was ticking against completion of the project, but, using my email group as a project post box, I was able to signal a change of pace. Our explorations in the weekly workshop moved into metaphorical and multilingual territory, towards the generation of a mass of linguistic raw material relating to individual, social and historical experience. Here, liberty was often defined through power relations, through its absence, withdrawal or denial, rather than through its conferral. The generational range in my group ran from about twenty years of age to seventy years of age, spanning a long experience of race relations in South Africa from all sides of the social divide and through many phases of political activity. Older students carried the direct memory of their own experience (and activism in many cases) whilst younger students were acutely aware of the conditions their parents had endured in the township and the many political stages that had led to the Apartheid regime being dismantled. All participants had also experienced the turmoil of contemporary South Africa where enfranchisement often seemed symbolic rather than actual. Personal experience – childhood, education, work, relational issues, sexual identities, mental health issues, the quotidian aspects of domestic life – also often featured in the writers' work, as if they were metonymic of the wider political, social and ethnic tensions.

I returned for this second phase of activity in early April 2018 and found my workshop poorly attended, largely due to participants travelling to homes

beyond Cape Town and failing to make it back in time. On the Friday of that week I received a phone call from Kobus Moolman, telling me that Michael Wessells, our head of department, had died after attending my workshop the day before. An expert on Khoisan culture and ecology, a writer and poet, Michael had attended every workshop session. He was a much-loved figure and it's hard to describe the effect his death had on staff and students. Disbelief was followed by a grieving process that undoubtedly strengthened the bond between us whilst also seeming both to question and to underline the importance of what we were trying to achieve. But Michael's contributions to the workshops were also mingled into the linguistic raw material I had been amassing and there was a sense in which completing the project was a way of honouring and fully realizing that contribution.

It was at this half-way point in the project that the collaborative process entered a new and more collective phase through harvesting the multilingual elements from student notebooks, exploring the metaphorical imaging of our abstract notion, generating new work through the workshops and through our email network of just over thirty contributors. If I had initially felt that my project might make contact with groups outside UWC, I had come to realize that the UWC community was diverse in many ways, from age to gender to sexuality and ethnicity, and, given constraints on my time, that this should be my focus. From the outset, I had been taking photographs on the campus and during workshops, so that the website I hoped to build would have a visual narrative and appeal.

In the closing three weeks of the project the process of assembly began, transferring our multilingual material onto strips of paper and assembling these on the large table in the seminar room. An initially random sequence of poetic lines was gradually refined: duplicate images of expressions were reduced to singular occurrence, whilst others were duplicated to form refrains. The poem was shaped by the rhythms of lines and linguistic occurrence and by a tentative narrative form that went in pursuit of layered or multiple meaning. Verbalising the poem at each workshop session also became a shaping mechanism. After each of the closing workshops I typed up a "latest version" of the poem and sent it into the wider email group for comment. So, whilst the smaller workshop group was subject to fluctuation from session to session, the wider group

formed a stable sounding-board for the developing work.

A final draft of the poem emerged during my final week in South Africa, one version of many that could have been assembled from the available material. This was brought about through table-top editing: ordering strips of paper with lines of poetry written on them on the huge seminar table, until a version was arrived at. The strips were then glued to pieces of A-4 paper, so that the whole poem took on a modular quality. It was then typed up and edited as a digital version that could be distributed for comments into the email group. Again, Delia Meyer, who had helped me to create a performance of the *Many Women, Many Words* performance poem at the *Writing for Liberty* conference, helped to create a scripted version of the text, distributing it between five voices and again as a choral form, thinking of the rhythmical occurrence of individual and collective voices. In the final workshop in the final week of my residency we performed the poem and a simple recording was made using a mobile phone. The result is not a final, finished or even highly polished version of the text. But this very provisionality, the sense that it was a version of versions, seemed essential to a project which had unveiled a tentative relationship with the notion of liberty as reality, symbolic state or teleological process. What seemed to liberate was language itself in the moment of its expression and our spontaneous recording of the poem captures some of that spirit (see *Taking Liberties* website).

This extract from the collaborative performance poem, "Liberty", gives some sense of its thematic shifts and linguistic modulations:

### Liberty (extract)

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
it has not fallen  
before it has fallen

Liberty  
it's a revolution  
a freedom song  
loud and carefree

Free will  
a small house with  
small windows  
a homecoming to  
feasting devils

decoration for a white  
and silver coffin

Imagination  
the trick  
is not to mind

The mind  
a cow held captive  
uyinkomo esesitrobheni

Follow the drinking gourd  
the northern stars  
to a mountain that  
sinks into the sea  
an ocean rising above it

\* \* \*

Voëlvry  
meaning free  
as a bird  
free as an outcast  
a fugitive  
meaning  
without borders  
meaning  
without meaning

Freedom is a jealous child  
a mumbled prayer  
for the dying  
a nightmare dream of falling  
to the abyss  
its fleeting images  
of night

A twisted smile  
an untouchable gift  
an uneaten fruit  
red-faced, spittle-spraying  
anger, an angel faithful  
to your deliverance  
a dizzy figure skater  
in the fortune teller's  
clouded mirror.  
(see Appendix II for full text)

The poem's structure reflects its modular development, the words of Xhosa and Afrikaans positioned to allow a translation that is also a form of reiteration and emphasis (especially for South



Africans, many of whom would have a grasp of English, Xhosa and of Afrikaans). Lines are freely indented to move away from the certainties of the left-hand margin into a more forward-searching and perhaps tentative sense of form. Our intention was to make the poem navigable for all three language-group speakers. The text was developed through the use of highly figurative language and the key modulations in the poem are not just brought about through language, imagery and voice, but through the shifts in meaning as definitions are offered then become subject to contrapuntal alternatives and patterns of interpretation. The performance context – especially the spatial positioning of performers in relation to audience – also gave the poem a dynamic quality as the dialogic nature of the poem becomes dramatized, with voice taking on a directional quality through a call and answer structure that builds tension and resolution analogous to musical form. Tone or timbre and the relative volume of voices also contributed to the building of meaning in the performance of the text, so that the poem on the page is merely a scripted predictor of the multivalent quality of the poem in performance.

The poem also brought into focus the issues of complex multiple – or aphoristic – meanings in the component languages. In Xhosa, *Akuhlanga lungehlanga* (which forms a refrain in the poem) carries the meaning, “it has not fallen before it has fallen”, but also brings the implication of inevitability, that what has fallen was always going to happen. The Afrikaans word *voëlvry* signifies a free flying bird, but also an escaping prisoner, neatly encapsulating the paradoxes of a liberty that is also constrained or overshadowed by capture. In the same way the reference to the “drinking gourd” implies refreshment and the constellation in the northern sky that led slaves to freedom in North America, whilst also subtly referencing the Apartheid practice of providing segregated drinking fountains for black, white and coloured South African citizens. This cultural and political context that lies behind and within the imagery of the poem offers a further tissue of complexity, contributing to modulations that engage rhythm, repetition, spatiality, cadence, timbre, linguistic identity and meanings enacted within the forward moving reading or performance of the poem.

In largely logistical ways, practice-based projects are subject to their participants in ways that can often be unpredictable. On my return to the UK, I was

still asking participants for their work, checking that they'd supplied ethical compliance forms, advising on which work to use, soliciting photographs, proof-reading and checking copy as it arrived. It wasn't a neat ending to the exploratory process of working with students at UWC and, inevitably, a few individuals who I'd really have liked to feature on the website I was building didn't meet the deadlines that I had to invoke to create closure.

The *Taking Liberties* website now contains photo galleries documenting the workshops and the wider life of the campus at UWC, as well as introductory material and essays by Kobus Moolman, Antjie Krog and Julia Martin, the performance poem (text and recording) with an account of the construction process, as well as a writers gallery with profiles and new writing from 19 individuals who form a cross section of staff members and full or part-time students attending the university in some capacity. The point of my project was to resist the temptation to draw conclusions from the project that then might be seen as a basis from which to draw wider interpretations. My project tried to capture the responses of individuals and groups working at a particular point in history and in response to their own complex histories and current events in South Africa. I have no doubt, despite the very strong sense of support I received from staff and students at UWC (the spirit of *Ubuntu*), that working as a British writer (however much my instinct tries to resist that identity) inevitably affected *my* perceptions, *their* perceptions and some of the resulting writing. And, in a wider sense, it's inevitable that any productive process, such as the making of the performance poem, was anticipated and guided by me rather than emerging through an entirely spontaneously independent process.

Yet each writer remained free to develop their work within the broad remit of the project. These flexible parameters meant that I never told them what to write or what not to write. Working multilingually meant relinquishing my control of process and using the expertise of the participants themselves to raise and resolve linguistic and conceptual issues relating to language and liberty. That liberty is an illusory ideal was self-evident from the outset, but I would argue that writing itself constitutes an exploration of the parameters of liberty within and through the self, as well as with reference to external events. Creative writing, in this sense, can validate personal experience that may seem to stand outside history

as nugatory or unacknowledged. The act of writing from that experience and re-shaping it in language may give it a greater resilience, durability and social standing than its retention in the subjective and constantly re-shaping mechanisms of emotion and memory. There was a definite sense that our work was a form of bearing witness to the experience of former generations and to a fractured and often incoherent sense of society in which individuals were trying to function and test their agency and potential for change. To understand liberty as an imaginary is to recognise both its power and its mercurial manifestations in a fraught reality. To acknowledge a lack of liberty is perhaps to understand the points at which liberty has been withheld and where it might begin to be engendered when the desire and needs of individuals interlock with wider social and linguistic identities that are forms of mobility rather than cultural fixities.

To return to the UK context, the discomfort of Creative Writing practitioners within the academy is not yet resolved. It may never be, since that is also an anticipated liberty, a fleeting imaginary. The neo-liberalism enshrined in the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act is creating a paradoxical and conflicted HE environment in which universities are simultaneously collaborators and competitors (embodied in the UK Research Council consortiums that compete for and share PhD funding, to take one example). As long as Creative Writing attracts students and continues to expand from print and performance-based production into digital ones, the market will sustain it. But we need a new accommodation with pre-existing, more traditional conceptions, of research and research practice: a recognition that creative writing in its many manifestations is – *sui generis* – a contribution to human understanding and knowledge and one that can be both intellectually and emotionally affective. Many of the problems that face humanity in the 21st century – from climate change to poverty, from forms of religious and ethnic radicalization to the frailty of the democratic franchise – seem to call out for such holistic forms of investigative endeavour. This is not merely a version of the old debate about healing schisms between the science and humanities but a debate about a fracture that is in danger of running between creative practice and the theorised practice of our closest neighbours in the Humanities. To consider one example of that state of apartheid, and in terms of internationalism and international research agendas, not one of the

United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals deals directly with culture and cultural values. Those principles have underwritten the £1.5 billion pounds sterling of funding tipped into the Global Challenges Research Fund, where each project has to show the economic benefit of an award. That seems a tragic underestimation of the range of human need, the potential of the cultural dimension to evolve and adapt to circumstances, and the role of arts practice in democratizing and initiating change. Because change, if it begins anywhere, surely begins within the individual self and is expressed and pursued through the unfurling and multivalent meanings of the word as well as the generative silences that surround it.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Appendix I**

#### **Quotations on Liberty**

“What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or in the holy name of liberty or democracy?” - Mahatma Gandhi

“It is difficult for me to imagine what ‘personal liberty’ is enjoyed by an unemployed hungry person. True freedom can only be where there is no exploitation and oppression of one person by another; where there is not unemployment, and where a person is not living in fear of losing his job, his home and his bread. Only in such a society personal and any other freedom can exist for real and not on paper.” – Joseph Stalin

“If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” - George Orwell

“When there are no ceilings, the sky's the limit.” - Hilary Clinton

“For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” - Nelson Mandela

“The business of the State is to use its organizing powers for the purpose of furnishing the necessary conditions which allow this people freely to unfold its creative faculties.” - Adolf Hitler

“A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.” - John Stuart Mill

“I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.” - Audre Lorde

“The end may justify the means as long as there is something that justifies the end.” - Leon Trotsky

“My liberty depends on your being free too.” - Barack Obama

“The most important democratic right for me is the right not to vote. What is the point in voting if you know all the candidates are only bent on bettering their own lives and empowering their relatives at the expense of all?” - Nkosinathi Sithole

“A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” - 2nd Amendment, USA Constitution

“But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling, like dew, upon a thought produces That which makes thousands, perhaps millions think.” - George Gordon Byron

“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” - John Milton

“I'm a supporter of gay rights. And not a closet supporter either. From the time I was a kid, I have never been able to understand attacks upon the gay community. There are so many qualities that make up a human being ... by the time I get through with all the things that I really admire about people, what they do with their private parts is probably so low on the list that it is irrelevant.” - Paul Newman

“Ignorance is of a peculiar nature: once dispelled, it is impossible to re-establish it. It is not originally a thing of itself, but is only the absence of knowledge; and though man may be kept ignorant, he cannot be made ignorant.” - Thomas Paine

“Human beings are inviolable. Every human being shall be entitled to respect for his life and the integrity of his person. No one may be arbitrarily deprived of this right.” - African Charter on Human and People's Rights

“This is my doctrine: Give every other human being every right you claim for yourself.” - Robert G. Ingersoll

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Until we are all free, we are none of us free.” - Emma Lazarus

“Understand that sexuality is as wide as the sea. Understand that your morality is not law. Understand that we are you. Understand that if we decide to have sex whether safe, safer, or unsafe, it is our decision and you have no rights in our lovemaking.” - Derek Jarman

“Together, hand in hand, with our matches and our necklaces, we shall liberate this country.” - Winnie Mandela

“I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed, without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today - my own government.” - Martin Luther King Jr.

“I myself have never precisely been able to find out what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.” - Rebecca West

## Appendix II

### Liberty

*In memory of Michael Wessels*

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
it has not fallen  
before it has fallen

Liberty  
It's a revolution  
a freedom song  
loud and carefree

Free will  
a small house with  
small windows  
a homecoming to  
feasting devils  
decoration for a white  
and silver coffin

Imagination  
the trick  
is not to mind

The mind  
a cow held captive  
uyinkomo esesitrobheni

Follow the drinking gourd  
the northern stars  
to a mountain that  
sinks into the sea  
an ocean rising above it

\* \* \*

Voëlrvy  
meaning free  
as a bird  
free as an outcast  
a fugitive  
meaning  
without borders  
meaning  
without meaning

Freedom is a jealous child  
a mumbled prayer  
for the dying  
a nightmare dream of falling

to the abyss  
its fleeting images  
of night

A twisted smile  
an untouchable gift  
an uneaten fruit  
red-faced, spittle-spraying  
anger, an angel faithful  
to your deliverance  
a dizzy figure skater  
in the fortune teller's  
clouded mirror

\* \* \*

Indlovu ayisindwa ngumboko wayo  
an elephant is not burdened  
by its own trunk

Amatsha ntliziyo ngawo ahleliyo  
truth sets you free

Sweet release!

Truth is that knife slipping  
across your fingertips  
a Rubik's cube  
a squawking guineafowl  
dodging traffic  
a dream incinerated

A prayer for  
the children  
an ocean the size  
of a raindrop  
in freefall  
free as vapour  
free as air  
or breath

\* \* \*

A mythical bird  
in an old baobab  
forever young

A monster  
misunderstood  
a monstrous  
misunderstanding

Mind forged manacles  
mental freedom

Break down the walls!

Reclaim the streets!

Spring to the mountains!

ukuntingela entabeni!  
ukuntingela entabeni!

\* \* \*

A life without freedom  
is a body  
without a soul

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
it has not fallen before  
it has fallen  
that window  
on darkness  
that mirror  
of disparity

\* \* \*

Vryheid!  
Vryheid!  
Vryheid!

Freedom is trying  
to pronounce  
itself  
to say itself  
speaking in the tongues  
of liberty  
of nakedness  
Inkululeko

\* \* \*

Free speech  
is the key  
to jail cell doors  
a white lie exposing  
subtle truth  
without shadow

without reflection  
a constant nightmare  
a fading dream

Inkululeko  
freedom is a naked  
fugitive  
unchained

\* \* \*

Voëlvry  
a bird  
untethered

Ukhululekile  
a falcon  
set free

Wathinta abafazi  
you strike a woman

wathinta imbokodo  
you strike a rock

Voestek!

\* \* \*

Ukugqabadula  
is to gallop away  
to flee to freedom

Limping, wounded  
pale as death  
at the shining hour  
the unnavigable river  
flowing through boulders  
a dance  
with unknown steps.

Ibalek'u moya  
free as wind  
as air  
as breath

An angel with black wings  
a weeping willow  
a circus dream  
loud and carefree  
a feral creature

I'd rather die  
    on my feet  
than live as a secret  
    than live  
        on my knees

• • •

Ibalek'u moya  
    free as wind in  
a hawk's wings

Voëlvry  
    a fugitive  
on the loose  
    a dream bird

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
    it has not fallen  
before it has fallen  
    though it will always fall  
that window on darkness  
    that mirror of disparity

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
Akuhlanga lungehlanga

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## About the Author

**Graham Mort** is Professor of Creative Writing and Transcultural Literature at Lancaster University and an Extraordinary Professor in the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of the Western Cape. He has worked extensively across sub-Saharan Africa developing mentoring projects for writers working in print-based media and radio. He has published ten collections of poetry and two collection of short fiction. His book of poems, *Black Shiver Moss* appeared from Seren in 2019; a new book of Short fiction *Fado and Other Stories* will appear from Salt in June 2020.



# Ekphrasis in Still Life with Black Birds

Finding a new space - art and prose  
in collaboration

Joanne Reardon

## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a site-specific collaboration between the author and the Cotswold artist, Richard Kenton Webb: *Still Life with Black Birds* at the Corinium Museum in Cirencester. The collaborative project was formed of a series of black and white linocuts and a short story, both of which were displayed together in the Museum's dedicated gallery space during September 2014. The paper considers the borderline between collaboration and ekphrasis in terms of the more traditional definition of ekphrasis associated with poetry, which is concerned with the poetic description of a work of art. The paper will consider a new "intermedial" space where the outcome of ekphrasis and collaboration, an exhibition of images and texts as well as a printed book, comes directly out of the dialogic process which precedes it – the "intermedial" space being the dialogue between the two art forms. It will also consider the way ekphrasis arising out of collaboration stimulates consciousness through the way words work in dialogue *with* the artwork.



## Background

This paper focuses on a site-specific collaboration with the Cotswold artist, Richard Kenton Webb: *Still Life with Black Birds* which was exhibited at the Corinium Museum in Cirencester in September 2014. We are practice-based researchers who have known each other for over thirty years but have only recently started working together. The collaboration took place over two years with work passing back and forth between us. The work was neither *descriptive* (associated with the more familiar use of ekphrasis in poetry where the poems describe the artworks) nor *illustrative* (where the artwork illustrates the narrative). The work emerged from dialogue and discussion arising from a shared past as well as a shared interest in crime fiction which was an influential aspect of the collaboration. Both of these things allowed us to dispel the idea, as poet Harriet Tarlo and artist Judith Tucker explore in their own paper on site-specific ekphrasis, *Off Path, Counter Path. Contemporary Walking Collaborations in Landscape, Art and Poetry*, “that one art form is privileged to ‘speak’ above another” (Tarlo and Tucker, 2017: 106). The final published work, in the exhibition and the accompanying text, became a new and complete work in its own right which represented the contribution of both practitioners in equal balance.

Kenton Webb had sketched 15 images which he sent to me in March 2013 asking if I would be interested in writing a prose narrative to accompany them. The artwork depicted scenes from a crime narrative which I explored and developed in a written text, *Still Life with Black Birds*, a crime narrative set in an archaeological context. The final results of the collaboration comprised a series of black and white linocuts and a short story, both of which were displayed together in the Museum’s dedicated gallery space and were accompanied by a lecture and a reading from the work as part of the outreach project in public engagement which ran alongside the exhibition. For the purposes of this paper I will not distinguish between the linocuts and the initial ink drawings sketched by the artist, focusing on the images rather than the medium to trace the development of the project.

Both writer and artist worked within the conventions of a crime narrative but used the museographic context of the museum to enhance and manipulate the content by using an existing archaeological

display at the Corinium Museum to underpin the creative approach. The Corinium has a display within the museum shown in Figure 1 which reconstructs the excavation of an Anglo-Saxon burial site discovered in Lechlade, Gloucestershire in 1985. This display inspired ideas for the nature and setting of the “crime” shown in the sketches and revealed in the final text which was centred around the search for an Iron Age bowl, a grave that should not be opened and the narrator of the story, a protagonist who deals in stolen artefacts and who can change identity at will.



**Figure 1: Anglo Saxon burial, Corinium Museum. Photo: J. Reardon**

There were further influences on the written text – my own experience of studying Archaeology at Leicester University as an undergraduate and the essay, “The Woman in the Field”, written by Kathleen Jamie in her book *Sightlines* (2012) and which I went back to in the writing of *Still Life with Black Birds* as it seemed to deal with many of the same ideas I was intending to explore in the text. Jamie’s account is about a Neolithic grave site and much of her description echoed my experience of being on an archaeological dig on a Roman site as a student. Re-reading Jamie’s text allowed me to recapture the authenticity I needed for my own text and introduced an extra dimension to the process of reflecting on this work in this paper in thinking about the practice of ekphrasis as inter-textual.

Following the exhibition, *Still Life with Black Birds* was published in a signed, limited edition by Artist’s Choice Editions in 2015.

## Collaboration or ekphrasis?

During the process of working on this project, I discovered that the nature of collaboration is as much about working apart as it is about working together. The drawings came before the writing and already had a clear visual narrative so the process of working in different mediums to deliver one unifying story placed competing demands and expectations on me as the writer in terms of creative outcomes and this challenge, particularly in terms of how I have come to understand the nature of ekphrasis, underpins the basis of this paper.

The boundaries between what constitutes collaboration and what might genuinely be termed ekphrasis rests on how the writer translates and interprets what already exists in a visual text without being too literal about translating it into a written text. The writer also needs to be mindful of James Heffernan's assertion that ekphrasis is "dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers from the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication" (Heffernan 1993: 5) and it is this idea that represents the more traditional thinking behind what is thought of as ekphrasis where poetry describes a work of art. *Still Life with Black Birds* is a work of prose and was my second prose collaboration. The first collaboration was with the artist Iain Andrews on *Mythopoeia* at Warrington Art Gallery and Museum in 2012 where I reimagined the story of "The Twelve Wild Ducks" reproduced in Angela Carter's *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (Carter: 1992) in my story "My Mind's Eye" (Reardon: 2012). I am in the process of working on a third project with the artist Natalie Sirett, writing in response to a series of sculptures, found objects and paintings around themes found in fairy tales and to be displayed within a museographic context. However, each time I find myself asking the same questions about the nature of collaboration: am I working in response to a work or creating something independent of it? Or, is the real collaboration what happens in the dialogic space between these two things and is this "intermedial" space where the dialogue occurs what ekphrasis *really* means?

This paper therefore aims to contribute to the literature on the study of ekphrasis in Creative Writing by examining this "intermedial space" through the creation of *Still Life with Black Birds* where the outcome of ekphrasis and collaboration,

an exhibition of images and texts as well as a printed text, comes directly out of the dialogic process which precedes it. The paper will consider how narrative which is "one of the most powerful impulses in ekphrasis [can] deliver story out of the single moment" (Loiseaux 2008: 22) and the way that ekphrasis arising out of collaboration stimulates consciousness through the way words work in dialogue *with* the artwork.

## Learning to read visual language

A traditional ekphrastic approach is defined by Leo Spritzer as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (1962: 72) but, for me, this seems too narrow an approach to describe the way of working I have developed as my ekphrastic process, even though this has come to be seen as the definition of ekphrasis most widely used and understood. During the first centuries CE the word ekphrasis was a rhetorical term for descriptions that would bring anything ranging from a person, a place, a thing and even ideas to life in so vivid a way that they each would become clear in the audience's mind. Ekphrasis is traditionally associated with poetry and its definition: "the use of detailed description of a work of visual art as a literary device" comes from the mid-17th century: via Latin from Greek where "ekphrasis 'description', comes from ekphrazein 'recount', from *ek-* 'out' + *phrazein* 'tell'" (Oxford English Dictionary). In ekphrastic process the writing, usually coming after the work of art, is responding to a statement already made about something, with John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (Leeson 2004: 507) and W H Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (Leeson 2004: 657) being two of the most famous examples of this. Comparisons then are made more often between poetry and painting in terms of a dialogue which aims to connect the conscious with the unconscious self. Although this exchange of the conscious with the unconscious self is always at the heart of *any* ekphrastic process (and I would argue from my own experience that this is easier to do through poetry), it is this dialogue and the fact that I work mostly in fiction, that raised questions about the nature of ekphrasis in my writing practice.

Ekphrasis can be seen simply as an exchange between the visual and written element coming out of the fact that in everyday life, we turn what we see into verbalised accounts of what we've experienced. What a writer does is to translate or reinterpret this

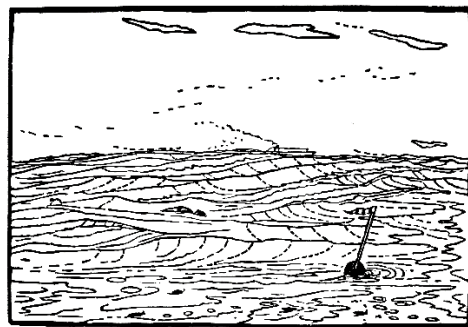
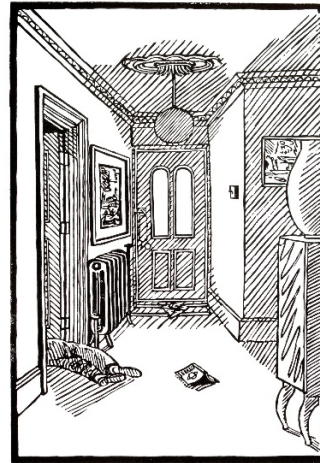
element in the written word for readers so that they can experience it too. Poetry can be more responsive in this sense, finding the precise word to encapsulate an image or an idea. This is explored by Tarlo and Tucker where they discuss whether “sometimes what is problematic to achieve in one discipline might be relatively straightforward in another” (Tarlo and Tucker: 2017) and illustrate this by their example of it being “difficult to draw birds circling in the distance without resorting to cliché, while the single word ‘gulls’ located high on the page encapsulates all” (Tarlo and Tucker: 2017).[1] I can concur with this having also written poetry as part of an ekphrastic collaboration in October 2019 as part of an exhibition of prints by Natalie Sirett at the Burgh House Museum in London.[2]

Ekphrasis in prose fiction requires a different approach. Narrative can be found with ease provided it has the elements it needs to sustain it – characters, ideas and a landscape from which they can emerge to create a story. “The job of the poet” Jeanette Winterson writes in *Art Objects*, “is to delight and disturb the reader when the habitual pieces are put together in a new way” (1996: 75). I would argue that this is what happens when prose fiction appears in an unexpected context such as alongside an art work in a museographic context, not telling the viewer what they are seeing, but offering a new way of seeing it. Cognitive science has shown that viewing a visual object involves the creation of a visual image – a picture in the mind if you like – which the non-visual part of us can interpret and verbalise if we want to so that it is possible “that a piece of information obtained through the nonverbal channel can be verbalized, while verbal information can be expressed in mental images” (Nęcka 2011: 217). In this way we could see all creative writing as ekphrastic, viewing it the way W.J.T. Mitchell describes in his classic essay on this subject where “there is no essential difference between texts and images” (Mitchell 1994: 160). In *Still Life with Black Birds*, where both writer and artist were trying to achieve similar aims (in creating a crime fiction) to entice a viewer/reader to the new visual and verbal text, we were both looking to come together in a single response which could only be translated through what must surely be an ekphrastic process.

### The process

In March 2013, Richard Kenton Webb sent me a series of 15 images, sketches which displayed a clear

linear narrative depicting some kind of crime story. The images in Figures 2 and 3 show the key images which suggest this – *Vincent* is an image of a body lying in a hallway; *The Sea* pictures a body floating in the sea. There were also images which showed rural and urban landscapes such as winding country lanes and urban roads and a series of images featuring a London bus.



**Figure 2: *Vincent* (left) Figure 3: *The Sea* (right)** reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb.

The drawings had been done on a trip to Belgium in November 2012 and featured scenes inspired by English coastal walks, standing stones from the Brittany coast at Carnac and the Cotswold hills where the artist currently lives and works. There were also images of settings that were formative in the painter’s early life – Greenwich and Blackheath. As he created them, the 15 drawings “felt like a crime narrative” to Kenton Webb (2014a: 72) and emerged organically from the artist’s passion for detective fiction and particularly the work of Henning Mankell (a passion shared by the writer) as well as his work as a painter which is predominantly in abstract landscape art. The drawings were sent to me because

I have known the artist for a long time and worked with him on several smaller projects including *Listen* at the Celia Lendis Gallery in 2014 where I used a poetic narrative to guide visitors around the paintings in an exhibition of landscapes of Brittany and Spain. I had accompanied the artist to Brittany where some of the prints in *Listen* were created so this is a good example of the way the exchange of a conscious with an unconscious self as discussed in the earlier part of this paper, was informed by my own experience of these landscapes.



**Figure 4: Brittany No. 5**  
colour linoprint, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

“You are a traveller trusting the hand that drew this map: black lines draped purposefully over the shoulders of hills and mountains and across the boundaries of a landscape half remembered half hidden. The line is where the colour starts, in startling contrasts of cerulean blue and vermilion – now orange, now red, cadmium and turquoise, filling seas and grasping air, sticking to gateposts and hedges and rivulet-running down pathways that lead to...where?” (Reardon in Kenton Webb 2014: 16)

The shared interest in crime fiction between us was also an important influence in this collaboration. The focus of my PhD at the University of Lancaster was a crime novel *Pleasure Land* (Reardon: 2011) accompanied by a critical reflection on the conventions of crime fiction which I was trying to explore and to experiment with over the course of my novel. One of the key elements in this was research into the work of crime writers such as Henning Mankell and in particular the way he uses

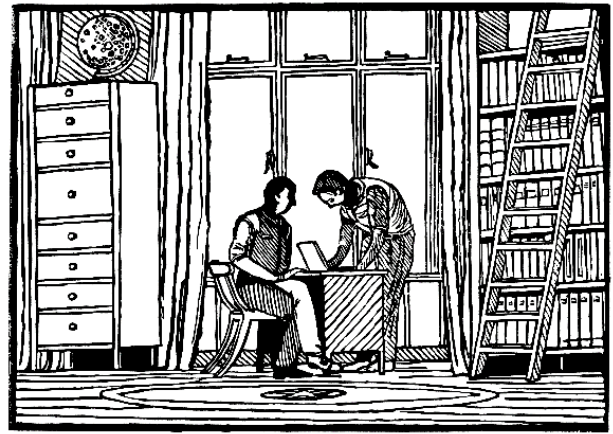
landscape in his writing where “the bleak unforgiving soil of Skåne in the south of Sweden where the books are set, makes for a compelling, absorbing character whose voice inhabits the landscape as much as the story” (Reardon: 2011). The initial drawings sent to me by Kenton Webb were mostly of remote landscapes and it was from these landscapes (rather than the urban images of the London bus etc) that the character of the shape-shifting archaeologist, who is also the narrator of the story in *Still Life with Black Birds*, emerged and owed a great deal to the enigmatic and troubled detective, Kurt Wallander, found in the novels of Henning Mankell (Mankell: 2003, 2004).

As a dialogic form, ekphrastic writing would always seem to be responding to someone else’s work and it occurred to me that the very dialogic nature of the process, and the fact that we had known each other for a long time, demanded that this would not so much be a response as a conversation. This conversation would be the “intermedial” space where the final published work came into being. Kenton Webb stated in an interview at the time of the exhibition that, “We are open to the viewer’s interpretation of the images and texts, but there is a completed story within all of them” (Kenton Webb 2014b: 23) and in the early stages of our discussion there was an intention to create a looser text, one which could be moved around beneath the pictures at the exhibition to change the events of the narrative. However, as Kenton Webb states there was “a completed story” in each one of the pictures so where was my new text to come from?

From the early work of the imagist poets such as Ezra Pound, poets have seen in artworks “an immediacy, a presence, a ‘hereness’ that they have wanted for words, but that they suspect words can only gesture toward” (Loiseaux 2008: 4). Working with prose rather than poetry in response to artwork is a different process and offers different challenges but given that Kenton Webb’s work is also largely abstract, this “immediacy” felt like something I could exploit for the reader because this was a crime fiction and the narrative could only be achieved through dramatic action in prose rather than poetry. This was also something I was starting to explore in *Listen* in 2014 (Fig 3) by creating a narrative journey for the viewer through the exhibition. There was, as I found when I first looked at these initial 15 drawings, the kind of “dramatic confrontation” Mitchell talks about where he finds “no essential difference between texts

and images” (Mitchell 1994: 162). The story was in the images and my role as writer was to exploit the antagonism that existed between the visual and the written representation of the same “completed” story in a new work. I wasn’t being asked to illustrate them; the two of us were working in reverse to the way in which an illustrator may bring their interpretation to a written narrative which presents possibly more challenges for the writer than for the artist. In the artist’s mind, the pictures already had a narrative so where was the space for another one? And whose story would this ultimately become: the artist’s or the writer’s? A new narrative was needed, influenced by what already existed in the visual text. This is where the idea of an “intermedial” space started to form. The new work, arising from our collaborative dialogue within this space would create a third “text” to the two existing ones which comprised the sketches and my narrative together in one space.

The concept of “interpretation” Kenton Webb talks about here is evident in the episodic nature of the final written text where, although there is a ‘separateness’ about the two, neither the visual text nor the written text can really work on its own. This was also the reason why I chose to have the story narrated in the first person by a narrator who is always elusive, “running, shifting shape, watching for shadows” (Reardon 2015: 35), a character drawn from the influence of Patricia Highsmith’s Tom Ripley, a character of such “insolence and audacity” (Highsmith 1983: 75) that he could carry this new work on his own. I was looking for an abstract character to match the abstract nature of the images, one who could become whatever the reader wanted him to be and inhabit this new story that artist and writer had created together. It was the image of the two characters in a library in Figure 5 that triggered this, the key questions: what are they doing there and why a library? This produced the idea that here were two men searching for something, one is a great archaeologist Vincent Landre and the other his protégé and partner in crime, the narrator of the story who is known only as ‘Pete’. It is Vincent’s murder that kickstarts the search for the Iron Age bowl as it becomes clear others are searching for it too. In this section of the story the reader is introduced to the interdependency between the narrator and Vincent. The setting of the library resembles the world of a nineteenth century explorer, where worlds are still yet to be found and the search for an object with almost supernatural powers seemed appropriate in this context:

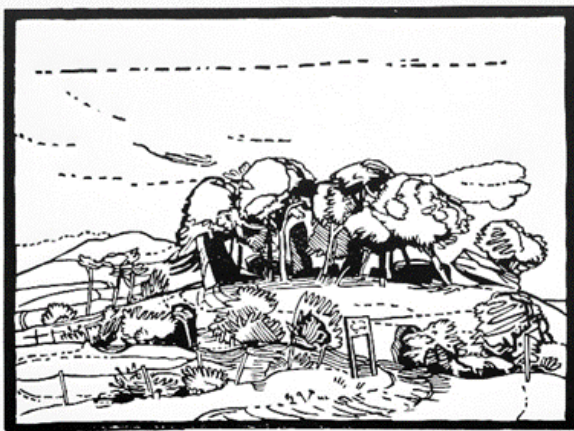


**Figure 5:** *In the library*, reproduced by permission of the artist Richard Kenton Webb

“We would spend hours in his library, the world at our shoulder, poring over manuscripts, searching long-forgotten dig sites and maps – following the road less travelled, searching for the things less found. It was in those things – the things that were yet to be discovered, that we knew our future lay and one day we would find the object that mattered most in the place where it was least expected to be found.” (Reardon 2015: 7)

Wallace Stevens compared the relation between poetry and painting to the dialogue that takes place between our inner and outer worlds, between our conscious and unconscious selves where: “The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us” (Stevens 1951: 169), one where the dialogue between the two forms of art and language is absolutely necessary. I would like to come back to this for a moment. Kenton Webb has always used this idea to underpin his work and in *The Landscape as Discourse* describes the process of drawing as “the way I make my thought-life visible. The way I give my unconscious life a voice” (Kenton Webb, 2015: 10). As a way of thinking about the ekphrastic process then, with Jeanette Winterson I started to understand it as functioning in “a world apart, a place where the normal weights and measures of the day have been subtly altered to give a different emphasis and perhaps slide back the secret panel by the heart” (Winterson 1996: 43). The image which slipped back this “secret panel” and which would not let go, was an image of the burial site seen in Figure 6, *The Burial Site*. Perhaps this tapped into my memory of studying archaeology and having access to ancient and secret places hidden from

the world through time. It was certainly this image which took me back to Jamie’s essay “The Woman in the Field” (2012: 43) and awakened the sense of a story undiscovered waiting for someone to find it. This is illustrated in the extract below Figure 6, where a man suddenly appears at the opening of the grave; a visitor from the past perhaps? The opening of the grave has put the characters into “contact with past lives through objects, nature and remnants that haunt the contemporary landscape” (Till quoted in Tarlo and Tucker 2017: 16) and drag the events that started with Vincent’s death towards a deadly conclusion where the ground refuses to yield its contents and drags anyone who tries to change that back into the past with them.



**Figure 6:** *The Burial Site*, reproduced by permission of the artist Richard Kenton Webb

“We are almost losing the light when we start to move the capstone. *We lifted it with our bare hands* Vincent had told me, so it should have been easy for us to move it now. But we have to bring poles and planks from the barn, so that we can heft our combined weights against it and even then it’s hard going. Just when it needs something more to release it, we hear a peal of thunder rolling in from the sea followed by the iron hammering of rain, the lash of it like ice on our skin. It’s then that I turn, for barely an instant, and see on the hill behind us, the familiar figure of a man. He is some distance but I see his face clearly and know the smile that is starting to form on his lips.” (Reardon 2015: 29).

### The museographic context

The site-specific nature of the project also presented unseen opportunities for the ekphrastic process. I had the sketches as a starting point but, somewhat

surprisingly, I also found that the museum itself was starting to inform the story that would emerge. I am interested in the way a visitor to a museum can come across an interesting artefact in the collection, be drawn to its singularity of shape or colour and then afterwards want to know how it was made and where it came from. Elisabeth Loiseaux raises this point when she talks about the way fiction can be helped by the museographic encounter because the museum or art gallery is the way most of us now encounter art or archaeological artefacts and this therefore “shapes the narrative impulse of ekphrasis” (Loiseaux 2008: 22) for the visitor. The study of Material Culture as a discipline focuses on the lives of objects: “In studying objects ... we study ourselves, as a species, and the diversity of human experience through time across the planet” (West et al 2014: v) and understanding the life of an object helps us to tell our own story. It also helps the writer to tell the stories of others. The display of works within a museum encourages this kind of understanding from the viewer and display is often manipulated specifically for this kind of contemplation. For example, the way artwork is often displayed on a white background which sets it apart or in the museum context where artefacts are arranged in sequence, suggesting a narrative or story attached to them. This is shown in Figure 7 below which shows part of the exhibition of *Still Life with Black Birds* in the Corinium Museum.



**Figure 7:** *Still Life with Black Birds*, Corinium Museum, 2014. Photograph: J Reardon

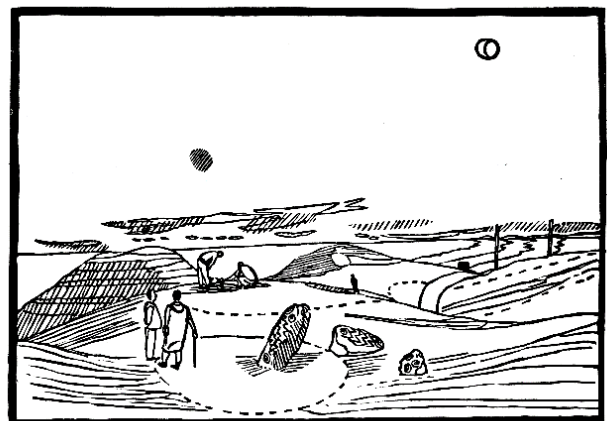
Displaying artefacts in this way allows a new narrative to emerge from the ekphrastic process where “narrative [is] seen as language’s way of distinguishing itself from the image, of doing what the language can’t” (Loiseaux 2008: 22). Contained within a museographic context then, the reader and

viewer are given an unspoken invitation to bring their conscious and unconscious selves together within this contemplative space and to be open to developing an understanding of this new narrative.

The Corinium Museum houses one of the most extensive collection of Romano-British antiquities in Britain and dates from when Corinium was the second largest city in ancient Britain. It also houses Prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon collections with one of its most famous exhibits that of the grave of a sixth century Anglo-Saxon “princess” (so-called because of the high value of the artefacts contained in the grave) discovered in Lechlade, Gloucestershire in 1985. She was found buried with more than 500 individual pieces of jewellery and ornamentation, including an ivory ring, a large amber necklace from the Baltic region and gold and silver brooches from the Rhineland. The grave is recreated in the museum exactly as she was found [3]with artefacts from the grave site displayed in cases around it.

The standing stones and the remote landscape surrounded by sea that was evident in the sketches for *Still Life with Black Birds*, together with my encounter with the grave in the museum further embedded my idea of a land of secrets waiting to be revealed. It recalled that experience of taking part in an archaeological dig in Yorkshire as an undergraduate student in the rain and the wind and recalling the hardship of it, the chipping away at the palimpsest of life below the ancient soil combined with the hope that some secret treasure might emerge from the ground. When I came across Kathleen Jamie’s essay “The Woman in the Field” (2012) many years later, which charted her experience of an archaeological dig (which coincidentally took place around the same time as my own), I identified with her awareness of “the pulse of ancient energy in the land” and the way it was “quietly persistent” (Jamie 2012: 46) waiting for the right moment to reveal its secrets. She describes one blade of corn growing taller than any of the others in the field indicating an ancient disturbance and remarks on the way “It knows a secret, which everyone else has forgotten, and which it discloses to the sky” (49-50). This discovery and the intertextuality of the encounter with Jamie’s work together with the drawing of the standing stones and the grave in the museum, gave me the first idea that there should be a secret at the centre of the story in *Still Life with Black Birds* and landscape was becoming ever more important as a key to this.

When we started discussions on the collaboration we decided to bring the diverse locations and landscapes Kenton Webb had created to build a story set in two locations which would be “imbued with memories, residues and the echoes of events” (Kenton Webb 2015: 17) and we both decided that using the standing stones as the central location to this would bring such echoes into the text. London would be the second location, the one where the inciting incident occurred, with the body in the hallway seen in Figure 2, *Vincent*, the murder which kickstarts the search for the secret which is the artefact buried in an Iron Age grave waiting to be discovered. London is the site of Vincent’s home, where the library is located and in which Vincent and “Pete” look for the “long-forgotten dig sites and maps...searching for the things less found” (Reardon 2015: 7). In the image of *The Burial Site* (Figure 6) the standing stones were less obvious but as the story started to develop, Kenton Webb made them more central to the narrative I was writing. At this point the “Black Birds” from the title started to emerge too:



**Figure 8: *Standing Stones***, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

“It is one of those flat grey days that you get at the start of spring with winter still clinging to its coat tails, and the capstone is where we expected it to be, near the trees, where the trench ends and the settlement begins. A drunken circle of hobbled boulders and stones, some tipped over, others upright, have been hidden for decades by undergrowth, but as we uncover them we notice the birds watching us, hanging in the sky like a constellation of black stars.” (Reardon 2015: 21)

This was the “magical” point at which the drawings started to listen to the text in closer detail and the

text in turn started to “look” at the images. The images in Figures 6 and 8 show these “hobbled” stones, leaning over and hidden in the trees, different shapes and sizes. Tarlo and Tucker discuss the physical act of walking as part of their collaboration as they navigate paths together and see things through “four eyes not two” going on to consider the way that “Collaborative fieldwork involves diversions and negotiations as we deliberate and agree on paths and ways off paths, a process far more self-conscious when walking together than walking alone” (Tarlo and Tucker 2017: 114). This mirrors exactly the way *Still Life with Black Birds* was starting to take shape. The “paths and ways off paths” becoming the emerging narrative, both visual and textual, with artist and writer starting to see the same material in different ways which then became the final text.

New images appeared, the standing stones as they would have been in antiquity which are shown in Figure 8, *Standing Stones*, for example shows characters from both the past (who are watching the dig) and the present (the diggers) to create the link between past and present where “You are placed in time. But within that there’s a bit of room for manoeuvre” (Jamie 2012: 71). The standing stones in the story were located on a remote fictional island off the coast of Scotland. I’d visited Mull and Iona in 2008 so I was drawing from my own memory of the landscape of these remote places and Kenton Webb used his memory of the stones at Carnac [4] which we had also seen together in 2012. The real places we both knew from memory were just the starting points and if the truth of a new place created by the writer is “both experienced and invented” (Mort 2001: 181), I wasn’t worried about creating a place that didn’t actually exist. The imagined landscape came from our shared memory, of using “four eyes, not two” (Tarlo and Tucker: 2017) and Kenton Webb responded to this by creating new drawings that came only from imagination and from what was being created in my text as it emerged. In using the landscape in this way, we both found a “rich plurality, even ambiguity, of meaning” (Lodge 1992: 139) which allowed us to find the space for our new narrative. The final story that emerged is that of a lost, ancient bowl, a bowl that legend has it, possesses power over life and death. An archaeological dig is close to unearthing it but there is a race to get there first – a race between the archaeologist who has come to claim it and the hundreds of restless black birds clamouring in the trees who have been guarding it for centuries. One man has already been murdered

because of it and as the storm gets closer, the birds are restless; the race to find the bowl becomes a race against time itself. Using the landscape and its features to drive the narrative allowed us to explore the setting as “past and future...the eye through which each present slips” (Mort 2001: 181).

On reflection, Jamie’s essay represents a clear source of unconscious interaction for me in terms of the emotional drive of the narrative in *Still Life with Black Birds* and in the course of writing this paper I’ve gone back to the essay to see how the two texts are in dialogue with each other. The weather is what I remember most about the dig I worked on as a student. This is also something Jamie references in her essay when describing the moment her dig uncovered the Neolithic henge and “the instant we began to violate the grave, a tremendous clap of thunder rolled down from the hills” (Jamie 2012: 64). In *Still Life with Black Birds* the narrator describes a storm that was “Gothic in its dimensions, a magnificence of storms, wind and rain” (Reardon 2015: 27) at the moment when the grave is uncovered. What stood out to me reading Jamie’s essay again, however, was the emotion that runs through it, the way that years after the dig she recounts that “whole summer had lingered in my mind, full of possibility” (2012: 65). It was this idea of ‘possibility’, I realise now, that I had carried from Jamie’s essay into the emotion and tone of *Still Life with Black Birds*. This sense of finding the one treasure everyone has been searching for permeates the narrative in *Still Life with Black Birds* and it matters not how the protagonists achieve this aim nor whom they must kill or betray along the way. As the narrator says, “It was in these things – the things that were yet to be discovered, that we knew our future lay and one day we would find the object that mattered most in the place where it was least likely to be found” (2015: 7). There was a sense that I was excavating the story as I wrote, uncovering characters and ideas. Jamie’s narrative talks about the moment when they discovered the grave hidden in the henge they were excavating as “thrilling, transgressive” adding “So, in its quiet way, was writing poems” (2012: 66). A similar discovery was also part of the “intermedial” space I had come to occupy as I interpreted the images in prose – I didn’t know necessarily what it all meant but it felt right, it felt “authentic...a true expression of – what? – a self, a consciousness” (Jamie 2012: 66), this started to feel, to me, what is meant by ekphrasis.



## Landscape

It's not an insignificant point that at the heart of this collaboration was the fact that Kenton Webb and I have known each other for many years, so working with this artist unearthed for me what Loiseaux called "an often hidden source of ekphrasis" (2008: 26) that of a collaboration between artist and writer which comes out of a friendship. Ekphrasis that arises from this kind of close collaboration produces an unusual creative energy and this, I think, is evident in our finished work. The poet, John Yau, describes ekphrasis of this kind as ekphrasis arising from "the 'company' of friends and others with whom he shares mutual interests and concerns" (Yau in Loiseaux 2008: 162). The mutual interest in this case was crime fiction and landscape, and the result is a celebration as much as a revelation of this shared interest.

"Landscape," writes Lee Martin, "is any fiction writer's starting point" (Martin in Steel 2007: 172) and the standing stones were mine, creating a connection between my conscious and unconscious self through the many dialogues I've had with the painter as someone whose work in landscape I have known and understood for so many years. Kenton Webb is primarily a landscape painter and explored the idea of place in *The Landscape as Discourse* (2015) published as part of his residency in Tasmania with LARQ (Landscape Art Research Queenstown). "Places may sing songs of other senses, people, emotions and happenings" he writes, "They may suggest...histories that we carry for (for better or worse) of other areas or circumstances, which affect how we view the present as much as the past," (Kenton Webb 2015: 17). These other things – the people, emotions, happenings that became the bedrock of the story that sprang into life from the landscapes of these drawings can only have emerged through the unconscious dialogue which has grown out of years of talking and discussion, between us.

This dialogue on the landscape also took account of our mutual interest in crime fiction. Landscape so often acts as a metaphor in crime fiction, particularly in detective fiction where the landscape shapes the voice and reflects the world the detective sees around him. The writer Henning Mankell (whom we were both reading around the time of collaboration) exploits this with his detective, Kurt Wallander, by setting the Wallander novels in the border area of Skåne in Sweden because "Border areas have

a dynamism all their own. They set off a reflex of unease" (Ferguson and McKie, 2008). *Still Life with Black Birds* being set on a remote island which is so far from the mainland that the only thing visible in the sea around are "sea tankers...so small they hover on the horizon as though they are balancing on a wire" (Reardon 2015: 16) exploits a similar unease. The archaeological team exist almost outside the normal world where they "live as they did in the Iron Age, breathing the breath of our ancestors and beating back our own pasts" (Reardon 2015: 16) the sense of opening up the past always at their fingertips. Kenton Webb introduced a detective who is trailing the two archaeologists and although it's not a central part of the narrative, it introduces a tension surrounding the search for the bowl.



**Figure 9:** *The elegant detective*, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

The detective who haunts the two archaeologists, trying to catch them out, has disappeared and this is why Vincent invites the narrator to come back and help him to find the bowl. The detective has doggedly followed the two men for years: "We dodged each other, me and Vincent and our detective, like cat and mouse, year on year, until a letter reached me on a dig in Patagonia. Our detective had disappeared" (Reardon 2015: 9) and although his disappearance is not explained, the implication is that someone is always watching them. This idea of being watched which is evident in all crime fiction also underpins a building sense of unease in the narrative. This sense

of unease was also where the black birds were key to the story. Through research on the topography of Iron Age henges I discovered the way these ancient burial sites would often be found with the bones of birds – corvids mostly, which were arranged in symmetrical patterns around the edges of the graves (Searjeantson and Morris 2011: 85-107). In *Still Life with Black Birds* the discovery of these bones leads the team to the grave itself.



**Figure 10:** *The Dig*, reproduced by permission of the artist, Richard Kenton Webb

“The smallest bones appear first, patterning the surface of the soil like stitches in the thread of the earth... The birds know something is trying to fight its way into the light as they watch their ancestors emerging from the earth. After the toy-like skulls come the larger skeletons, more identifiable as corvids – jackdaws, crows and rooks, and the voices in the trees become clamorous, the ravens’ calls as deceptive as human tongues.” (Reardon 2015: 29)

The living birds appear as a menacing presence as they watch the past being uncovered, waiting for their moment to wreak revenge. The suggestion in the story is that the birds are the guardians of the burial place and disturbing them means disturbing the past. “Violate” is the word Jamie uses in her essay to describe the moment they uncovered the Neolithic grave suggesting that once the past has been excavated there’s no going back.

Kenton Webb asserted that the images themselves each comprised a “complete story” but during the process of collaboration we did find a new narrative that came out of the collaboration and released, for me, the mimetic impulse in ekphrasis to represent a real world from the images in the story. The

birds, who were not in the original drawings, are an example of this. Just as there were gaps between the 15 images I was initially presented with, gaps where the story lay, I found that the pieces of the story acted like “frames [equating] to paragraphs in a story or stanzas in a poem [so that] to move between them is to move across the white space of the page” (Mort 2013: 33) and this felt something akin to the way we encounter pictures in an art gallery or the arrangement of artefacts in a museum where we see “the idea of the series, or works of art arranged in a meaningful sequence” (Loiseaux 2008: 22). The movement and the direction of the narrative therefore appeared in these spaces between the pictures giving licence to imagine what lay in between.

## Conclusion

The “intermedial” space of the final work came out of an ekphrastic process, yes, but also as a result of working through these ideas together. Whether or not this *was* collaboration or ekphrasis, I’m still left uncertain. The definition of “collaboration” can be defined as: “the action of working with someone to produce something” but it can also mean: “Traitorous cooperation with the enemy” (Oxford English Dictionary). This project was a bit of both. When thinking of collaboration it is generally in the first definition of working together towards a coherent outcome, but we weren’t doing this because there was one story in the drawings and then another emerged because our two mediums demanded that we tell the story differently and neither way is better. What resulted was a conversation and in terms of collaboration, it’s a conversation which is ongoing and of which the text of *Still Life with Black Birds* is only one part.

Although I have been engaged in ekphrasis for several years, I’m not sure when I set out on the first project in 2012 with Iain Andrews that I understood it as such. It’s only since the growing interest in ekphrasis as a way of working for writers has started to be discussed and explored more, that I’ve started to examine my practice in more detail. In this digitally enhanced age it’s possible to say that we tend to think in more visual terms anyway and to have a greater awareness and understanding of the transfer of narratives between the different platforms of seeing, writing and reading but more often, we almost don’t know that we are doing this. However, engaging in a collaboration with a

visual artist means that, as a writer, you are forced to think about this process and to examine it in detail, which brings everything, every word written and every brushstroke, into a sharper and closer focus. The eventual form this focus takes - poetic or narrative alongside chosen visual medium - is this collaborative “intermedial” space which creates an entirely new work, and this has helped me to start to understand the ekphrastic process in which I continue to be challenged and engaged.

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## Notes

1. See Tarlo and Tucker for illustration of this example in more detail. “Off path, counter path: contemporary collaborations in landscape, art and poetry” *Critical Survey* Vol. 29 No. 1, Spring 2017: 105–132.
2. This comprised a collection of sonnets to accompany prints and drawings around the Medusa myth. This ekphrastic collaboration which includes images and poems from the collection can be found at <http://www.sirett.com/medusa--her-sisters-book.html> [accessed 3/1/20]
3. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3556716.stm> [accessed 3/1/20]
4. See <https://www.ancient.eu/Carnac/> [accessed 3/1/20]

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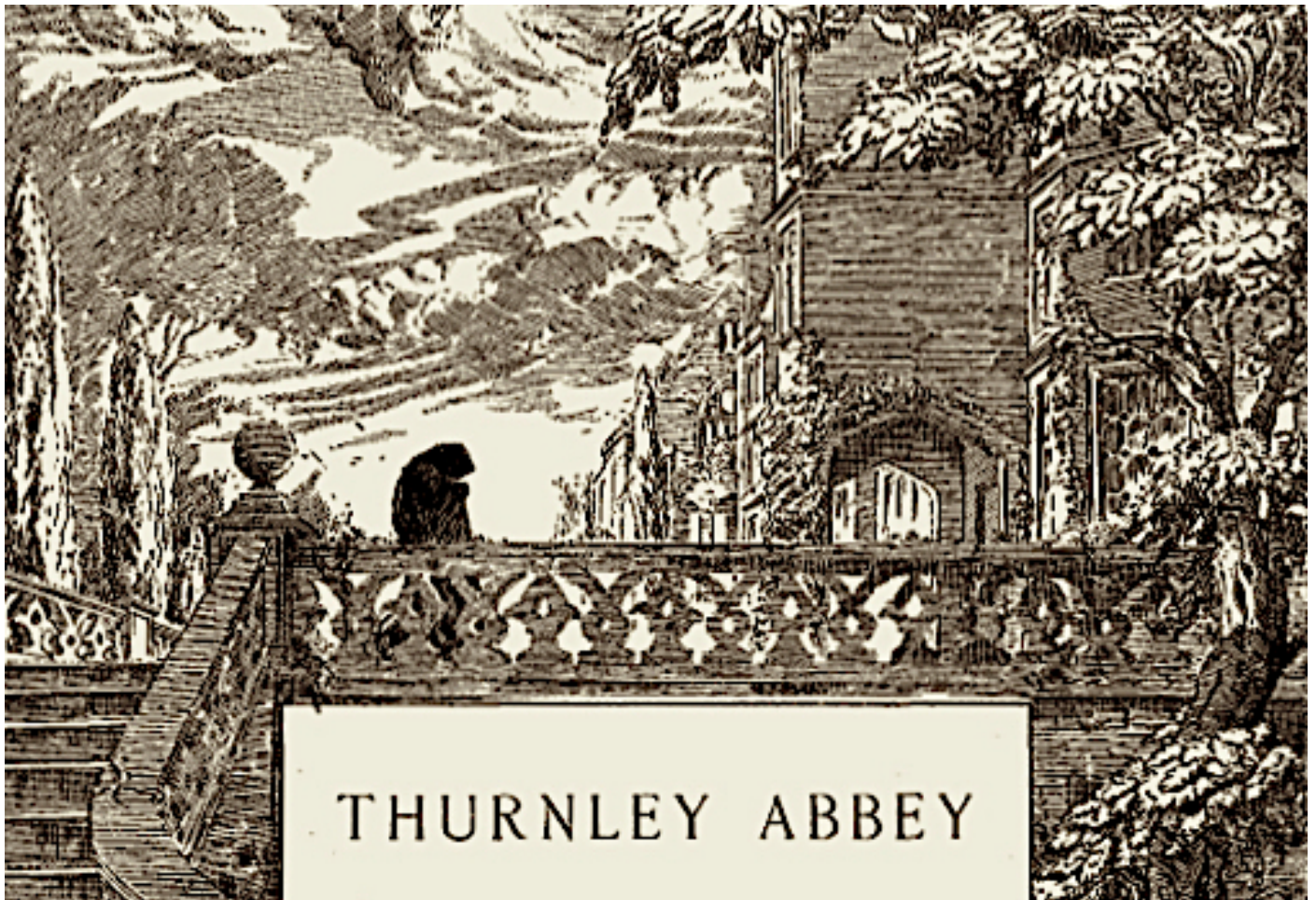
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## About the Author

**Joanne Reardon** a writer of drama, prose and poetry. Her collaborative and ekphrastic work with visual artists on site specific projects includes short fiction with: Richard Kenton Webb, *Still Life with Black Birds* at the Corinium Museum in Cirencester, *Mythopoeia* with Iain Andrews at Warrington Art Gallery and poetry, *Medusa and her Sisters*, with Natalie Sirett at Burgh House Museum in Hampstead. Her work has also been performed on BBC Radio 4 and she has worked as a Readings Producer with BBC Radio Drama as well as being Literary Manager at the Bush Theatre and National Theatre in London. She has an MA in Creative Writing from UEA and a PhD in Creative Writing from Lancaster University and is now a Lecturer for the Open University. Her short stories have been published by The London Magazine and Cinnamon Press and her first crime novel, *The Weight of Bones*, will be published with Leaf by Leaf in Autumn 2020.



# A Ghost in the Archive

## Rewriting Perceval Landon's "Thurnley Abbey" as Contemporary Historical Fiction

Leanne Bibby

### ABSTRACT

This article uses perspectives from cultural theory and my own writing practice to argue that contemporary historical fictions can function similarly to archives as the systems in which historical discourse operates, by containing and reframing real-life historical documents within invented narratives. I discuss my work-in-progress, a novella titled *The Thorns*, which rewrites Perceval Landon's 1908 ghost story "Thurnley Abbey" and seeks to engage with one of its implied historical contexts: the fraught and often bloody history of Roman Catholicism in England, specifically during the Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries. I contextualise this writing project with detailed reference to literary and cultural theories of fiction's relationship to historical discourse, specifically the idea of the archive itself, and describe some of the ways in which my novella engages with the histories behind the original text's focus on representations of silence, death and fear resulting from a disavowed past.

## Introduction

This article uses perspectives from cultural theory and my own writing practice to argue that contemporary historical fictions can function similarly to archives as the systems in which historical discourse operates, by containing and reframing real-life historical documents within invented narratives. My current creative project, a novella inspired by and rewriting large parts of Perceval Landon's often-anthologised 1908 ghost story "Thurnley Abbey",<sup>[1]</sup> is an exercise in writing a particular kind of historical fiction that seeks to excavate one of the text's implied contexts: the fraught and often bloody history of Roman Catholicism in England. This work-in-progress, titled *The Thorns*, shapes itself around evidence of this Catholic past, archiving certain real historical documents and inventing others to suit its fictional world.<sup>[2]</sup> Although the piece is fiction and not historiography, the terms 'excavation' and 'archive' have deliberate connotations of historical research and resonances in cultural theory that can be of wider use to writers of new fiction. Here, the term 'archive' is used to indicate at once the physical and digital spaces that store historical materials (documents and other objects), the verb meaning the act of storing such materials, and the abstract concept of the archive outlined in historical and literary theory. The definition of the archive as the real site of historical research is the main and first definition, encompassing as it does the physical and written evidence of past events that underpin any robust historical investigation. Accordingly, Tom Griffiths asserts that "the archive remains a defining site where historians know who they are and what they do" (2016: 14). Even this main understanding of the archive, however, figures evidence as material from which narrative is made, resulting in a legacy of literary as well as non-literary concepts, a selection of which are signposted in this article. Many if not most literary-critical readings of historical fictions point out the usefulness of images of archives and archival evidence in constructing a sense of 'authentic' history within fiction, both as tropes and the bases of historical detail. Archival, documentary evidence is usually, as Nicola Parsons states in a critique of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, "conventionally understood to guarantee authenticity" even while it "must be combined with the mnemonic frame of narrative" (2013: 120).

Historian Liesbeth Corens gestures towards both

the major definition of archives as collections and the concept of the archive while explaining the centrality of archives and record-keeping not only in the process of documenting English Catholic history throughout periods of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, rebellions, penal laws and other pressures, but also in figuring English Catholics themselves in historical narrative. In the specific context of the dispersal of English Catholics abroad during 16<sup>th</sup> century persecutions, Corens describes the collections and records assembled and edited since that time as "creative pursuits rather than finished products" (2016: 271). Archives are now more accessible than ever to scholars, readers, writers, and other interested parties owing to their digitisation and high profile in cultural products such as fiction and documentaries. As Thomas Augst explains, thanks to the labour of workers in heritage and cultural preservation, "digital tools are transforming archives into sites for the discovery and animation of historical materials" (2017: 220). This wording evokes the dynamic, discursive potential of the Foucauldian concept of the archive. The archive is not, as Foucault proposes in strikingly theological terms,

that which collects the dust of statements that have become inert once more, and which may make possible the miracle of their resurrection; it is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning*. (1972; 1989: 146, emphasis in original)

I follow Kim Sherwood (2019) in citing Foucault in this context of using archival 'traces' in writing historical fiction, but there is more to say about the utility of the archive for writers. This is not to imply that archives produce fictions as readily as facts, or that historical facts and fictions are of equal status, but that the archive (as a literary concept as well as a reality and a practice) can behave not only as a resource but as a kind of organising structure for writers of fiction, an idea I am testing with my current work. Treating fiction as a space to explore the concept of the archive is far from new in historical fiction, as is shown in the examples I will cite, but I contend that exploring the fiction-of-archive further allows for more detailed understanding of what I would call "textual" historical detail, or detail supported by documentary evidence that can be expanded by fictional means without undue conflict with fact. Fictions thus

elucidate the role that they play in developing historical knowledge in ways that further creative and critical debates, and new creative practice. The work of historical novelists often theorises their epistemological stake in writing, not merely writing about, the past; I discuss two of these, Caryl Phillips and Hilary Mantel, below. This article is one of the first in creative writing scholarship on the topic of the archive to offer extensive perspectives from literary studies, discussing these in terms of strategies specifically for the use of creative writers. The piece is organised into three sections: The Fiction as Archive, further explaining my conceptual framework in this article; “Thurnley Abbey”: Organising Ignorance into New Writing, giving an account of my critical engagement with Landon’s 1908 story; *The Thorns*: Rewriting “Thurnley Abbey”, exploring my own writing project; and a Conclusion.

### The Fiction as Archive

My own impulse to develop Landon’s short story began with my teaching of nineteenth century fiction and, later, contemporary historical novels. In the story, a traumatised passenger on a sea crossing, Alistair Colvin, tells a fellow passenger of a fateful trip to Thurnley Abbey, the family seat of his friend John Broughton. He recounts that during this visit he saw a figure in his room, the skeletal ghost of a nun that attacked him and left physical bones in its wake. Landon’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century-set text presents 16<sup>th</sup> century history as a jarringly ghostly and yet physical presence by way of the interconnected Images of the Abbey itself and the religious, corporeal and seemingly vengeful haunting even though the story is not, strictly speaking, historical fiction. The Abbey’s social, political, and religious history lingers in the details of the building (restructured over several centuries) and its contents which, significantly, are “put in thorough repair, although not a stick of the old furniture and tapestry were removed” (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 469):

The larger part of this building remained as it had been in pre-Reformation days, but a wing had been added in Jacobean times, and that part of the house had been kept in something like repair by Mr Clarke. He had in both the ground and first floors set a heavy timber door, strongly barred with iron, in the passage between the earlier and the Jacobean parts of the house, and had entirely neglected the

former. So there had been a good deal of work to be done. (ibid.)

The Gothic image of the barred door between the house’s sections from the two time periods, pre- and post-Reformation, signal that the “good deal of work to be done” is for the reader as much as the Broughton family: there are pieces of evidence and spaces in the text itself to explore further, as well as spaces for a writer to add further evidence. The revolutionary contexts of the Reformation and Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries are apparent. Appropriately, the story’s narrator Alistair Colvin relates that the actual “long-vanished Abbey of Closter” was located “some five miles away”, and the house itself built on the site of its infirmary (ibid.). The lost Abbey, then, is an historical narrative emerging in a spectral fashion not only as realist detail but as something unquiet, demanding something of the present time. It is no surprise, then, that its actual ghost, “a figure swathed in a rotten and tattered veiling”, with a face “not entirely that of a skull, though the eyes and the flesh of the face were totally gone” (475), is both frightening and heartrending: a spirit but also a forgotten corpse that brings to mind Roman Catholicism’s venerated relics but also countless, repeated legends of veiled or hooded ghosts and sealed rooms full of bones as discarded proofs of neglect and murder. Broughton urges Colvin to speak to the ghost if he should see it, and when Colvin has seen it and tells his friend that he has “smashed the foul thing into a hundred pieces” (476), Broughton cannot speak but only moves his mouth and hands, “just as a baby who cannot speak moves its hands”. Broughton’s distress and the “cowardice” (ibid.), as Colvin sees it, of the man and his wife fainting with fear, are symbolic of a history resurging out of the Abbey itself which its inhabitants are powerless to silence or deny any longer. This seems to be confirmed in the story’s final lines when Broughton is able to speak again, but can only say to Colvin, “half as a question, half as a reproach, ‘You didn’t speak to her.’” (478) This need for dialogue between the living and the dead is kept mysterious and thus the history behind the story is left somewhat inert; we are not told why Broughton wanted Colvin to speak to the nun, or whether the Broughtons had seen her and perhaps failed to speak to her themselves. The story misses, or neglects, many opportunities to engage with the past more closely, and the result is horror. I saw this clearly, living in Yorkshire whose centuries of Catholic history are both prominent and curiously subdued,

marginalised into the work of specialist museums, niche publications and research groups active in the region such as the Bar Covent Museum in York, the Catholic Records Society, and the English Catholic History Association.

Questions of speech and silence evoke long-standing debates about fiction writing and its relationship to history. The fictitious Thurnley Abbey, like many such real houses in England, is no longer a religious house, its history interwoven with and dominated by that of the ascendancy of the Church of England. Any act of writing ‘into’ Landon’s story in order to understand this process would be historiographic in nature, and a creative form of writing alongside English Catholic history. As I explored this subjugated history I perceived that there were, as an early line in my work-in-progress states, “thorns in time” (Bibby 2019: 17) – images and anecdotes of marginalised Catholic history in mainstream narratives of the making of British society, communities (notably in the north of England, the location of several Catholic uprisings during the Tudor period), and religious life. Written settings are, themselves, archival and ghostly in a way that recalls Landon’s unsettling descriptions of Thurnley Abbey, quoted above. Paul Magrs, in advice to authors on writing convincing settings, describes the need to collect diverse details and materials, weaving some of these into a scene; to select “aspects of the setting that would seem most pressing to the characters in the scene; then build outwards as they notice more and more out of the corner of their eye” (in Bell and Magrs 2001: 171). Settings and their histories may haunt, but they also draw the eye and provoke thought with their distinctiveness and, as in the case of Thurnley’s Jacobean furniture, their historical resonance almost as archives themselves. The prolific scholar of historical fictions Jerome de Groot notes some of the ways in which novelists can “articulate their own historiographical practice in the various notes, acknowledgements, bibliographies and addenda that are added to their books” (2009: 264); fiction is indeed implicated in such “historiographic practice” and archival activities, and not only for purposes of representing pasts but of seeking to know what their written and material traces mean. De Groot acknowledges that “historical fiction seeks to contribute to mainstream historical knowledge, as it represents the past in the present according to certain key rules, most often by the use of evidence, realism, and a seriousness of tone” (2016: 3). Clearly the “seriousness” aspect can take many creative forms

beyond “the realist mode in historical expression”, as fictions take part in “establishing modes of historical awareness, engagement, narrativization, and comprehension” (6). Those historical fictions which archive historical traces in imaginative ways frame and refigure documents in fiction precisely to restate literature’s serious stake in making knowledge, and in ways that supply further directions for writers in terms of how they might situate fiction in relation to fact. In the case of *The Thorns*, I determined that the piece would expand the story of the Broughtons and their haunted home, while taking the moments in Landon’s original that are suggestive of that home’s history, and archiving its documents there. As in Foucault’s dynamic formulation of the archive and Corens’s assertion of its creative role in Catholic historiography, the story will constitute an archive not in the sense of an inert, physical location of pure, dry “facts”, but as a written formation giving “animation” (Augst 2017: 220) to historical narrative.

Kuisma Korhonen’s summary of the ‘history/literature debate’ invokes the archive specifically as a concept, underpinned by the work of historian and theorist Hayden White, and is instructive for writers interested in the formal intersections between writing and documentary evidence. Korhonen specifies that White is clear on the distinction between actual past events and writing, and that, importantly, “the mere collection of facts [...] is, for [White], not yet historical discourse, but rather formation of an *archive*” accessible in turn to multiple other discourses (Korhonen 2006: 12, emphasis in original). Across White’s works which include his classic *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), “historical discourse” refers to “interpretation of this archive of past events by means of narration”, allowing the work of historians and literary authors to “overlap” (Korhonen 2006: 12). Korhonen’s use of the word “techniques” underlines the technical similarities between historiographic and literary outputs, but White’s work itself goes further by analysing their comparable significance in terms of supporting knowledge. As Korhonen observes, “artistic imagination [...] has a more serious role in our attempts to encounter the past in its otherness”, such as the undocumented majority of past events, people, and voices (2006: 18). Fiction, as Hayden White asserts in his essay ‘Historical Discourse and Literary Writing’, may help to remedy the shortcomings of an “older historiography” in which the historical document “was to be read for what it



yielded in the way of factual information” (White 2006: 26).

White then comments instructively on the “operation” that takes place in order to construct historiography: “facts” are extracted from pieces of documentary evidence and correlated where possible with each other, in such a way that “presupposes that the object of study remains *virtually* perceivable by way of the documentary evidence”, and which reads “through and around” the document’s overtly literary features (ibid., emphasis in original). Here, fictional aspects of factual writing suggest that fiction does work as an archive in that it is not only a repository for certain historical evidence (as in fictions that incorporate historical documents, as do Caryl Phillips’s ‘Northern Lights’ and Hilary Mantel’s *A Place of Greater Safety*, discussed below) but also signals, like an archive, that narratives of a real past are represented by that evidence. Therefore, the work’s literary features do not prevent it from collecting evidence and forming an archive as physical archives do, but can aid this process. Literary and, at the same time, historiographic paths beyond this “older historiography” are discernible in White’s suggestion of modernism as a literary mode evidently involved in, and not secondary to, the writing of history. Modernists authors were, for White,

as interested in representing a real instead of a fictional world quite as much as any modern historian. But unlike their historian counterparts they realised that language itself is a part of the real world and must be included among the elements of that world rather than treated as a transparent instrument for representing it. (White 2006: 25-26)

Crucially for writers of historical fiction today, modernists therefore “created a new conception of realistic representation itself and beyond that a new notion of reading which permits a creative re-reading even of the formerly transparent historical *document*” (ibid., emphasis in original) This fresh possibility of “creative re-reading” of evidence with a stake in the real world and past is evident in recent historical fictions that tread a paradoxical line between historically documented events and objects and fictional invention.

Consequently, historical fiction is more made than simply written, and made from different

but complementary discourses – literary and historiographic – in order to serve both literary and historiographic purposes. White is correct to argue that fiction functions as a “metacode” for translating “knowing” into “telling” (1987: 1). This is why Mantel’s novel of the French Revolution *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), one of the exercises in fiction writing discussed in her first Reith Lecture (Mantel 2017), ends with its narrator faltering at the moment of the executions of Georges-Jacques Danton and Camille Desmoulins, and then the insertion of a real document. The narrator explains: “There is a point beyond which – convention and imagination dictate – we cannot go; perhaps it’s here, when the carts decant on to the scaffold their freight” (Mantel 1992: loc. 15570). These limits of “convention and imagination” refer to historiography more than fiction, even though this is a novel and even though, immediately and in the same paragraph, the text takes us beyond that limit, to Danton witnessing “each bright efflorescence of life’s blood” as his colleagues and friends are guillotined (loc. 15579). Mantel’s novel both does and does not represent a history beyond the limits of the kind of documentary evidence to be found in an archive. The book’s final paragraph, then, asserts its stake in producing knowledge about its historical period by archiving such documentary evidence: the paragraph is a real section from *The Times* newspaper of 8 April 1794, detailing that “When the late reconciliation took place, between Robespierre and Danton, we remarked that it proceeded rather from the fear which these two famous revolutionists entertained of each other, than from mutual affection” (loc. 15593). This description also acts as a description of the literary narrative that precedes it, and links the text’s huge amount of invented dialogue between Danton and Maximilien Robespierre more strongly with the notion of evidence. Of course, this dialogue is not historical evidence but is certainly part of what Mantel, with reference to the broad idea of history in her 2017 BBC Reith lecture ‘The Day is For the Living’, described as the “method we have evolved for organising our ignorance of the past” (Mantel 2017) in productive, and not restrictive, ways.

### “Thurnley Abbey” – Organising Ignorance into New Writing

Although in Perceval Landon’s story the discursive “animation” (Augst 2017: 220) of history takes the form of a ghost, it does not have to. The issue of what results when history is fictionalised –

whether knowledge, ghosts, or both – is central to many of accounts of what historical fiction does to knowledge. Hilary Mantel created just such an invaluable resource when, in the lecture quoted above, she pondered evocatively that “We sense [the dead] have something to tell us, something we need to understand. Using fiction and drama, we try to gain that understanding” (Mantel 2017). Her image of writers “chasing after” the dead is also a metaphor for the desire and process represented both in “Thurnley Abbey’s” depiction of the past and my project to approach that past anew by rewriting the text. Mantel suggests that although the past is indeed “past” and unreachable, writers can “listen” to the dead as a strategy, and I would argue that Landon’s story also suggests this in its description of John and Vivien Broughton and their guest Colvin literally listening in terror to phantom footsteps outside the Broughtons’ room, moments after Colvin has fought with the nun and scattered her bones:

After ten seconds' utter quiet, I seemed to hear something. I could not be sure, but at last there was no doubt. There was a quiet sound as of one moving along the passage. Little regular steps came towards us over the hard oak flooring. Broughton moved to where his wife sat, white and speechless, on the bed, and pressed her face into his shoulder. (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 477)

Writers perhaps do not need to chase after the dead as Mantel describes; the dead may approach the present in those “[L]ittle regular steps” with an unnerving banality which, at the same time, speaks to writers’ and readers’ reasonable desire for history to be knowable. This is key to how and why historical fictions work partly by archiving narratives, items of language, and historical details. Narratives themselves are ghostly in their absent-presences over and alongside other narratives, from evidence and documents. Historical fiction, perhaps more than any other type, figures things that are both there and not there, real and unreal.[3] In addition, Mantel is correct that ‘history’ refers not to the past itself but to “the method we’ve evolved for organising our ignorance of the past” (2017). Historical fiction has certainly always encoded an awareness of the tension between the evidence, facts, and various narratives (including but not limited to myths and speculations) underpinning the historical contexts with which they work, and as such, fictions position themselves within the process of creating historical knowledge

by archival means: “information” alone, as Mantel explains, “is not knowledge” (2017).

As I thought imaginatively about the sixteenth century contexts Landon’s story implies, its sealed rooms brought to mind local examples of abandoned ‘priest holes’ such as those underneath the chapel in York’s Bar Convent and in an upper room at Ripley Castle near Harrogate, home of the Ingleby family who were, historically, Catholic recusants. The capacity for the literary text to function as an archive through these figured spaces and others recalled another short historical text concerned with a real, historically marginalised identity in the north of England. In Caryl Phillips’s story ‘Northern Lights’, part of his volume of imaginative life writing *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), Phillips reflects on the life of British Nigerian David Oluwale who died in 1969 after being assaulted by two police officers who were later convicted of his manslaughter. The text pieces together Oluwale’s story using fictionalised eyewitness accounts, a sweeping historical account of Leeds from its foundation onward, and lastly by gathering documents relating to its historical context. The story therefore archives both real and fictitious evidence in an inseparable combination as a way of voicing Oluwale’s beloved Leeds and as a vital aspect of centring Oluwale himself in his own story, part of the larger history of Leeds. The story’s final lines make clear the importance of this intertwined archival and literary work: “You have achieved a summit, David. Climbed to the top of a hill, and from here you can look down. You are still in Leeds. Forever in Leeds” (Phillips 2007: loc. 3123). In light of this, there are further implications of *The Thorns’s* archival strategies, in terms of resisting the anti-Catholic resonances of the gruesome haunting in Landon’s “Thurnley Abbey”. My novella ends not with the silent and dead nun but with her living equivalent praying over the land in the months before the Abbey’s Dissolution. She is necessarily displaced in time.

### ***The Thorns: Rewriting “Thurnley Abbey”***

In this final part of the article, I offer brief insights into my writing process and the practical consequences of my sense of “responsibility to the past” (de Groot 2016: 31), specifically as regards knowledge of English Catholicism. I will discuss selected aspects of the manuscript and how it negotiates Landon’s original, especially the figures of the nun and Vivien Broughton, the Jacobean

history of the house itself, and the original text's almost complete silence on that broader past. *The Thorns* replaces Alistair Colvin's central perspective in Landon's original story with the previously minor one of Vivien, the wife of John Broughton. I imagine her past as a pupil at a northern Catholic school based loosely on York's Bar Convent, and her awareness, early in her marriage, that Thurnley Abbey is a place of historic pain now rarely mentioned until her husband admits that he has long been haunted by a tormented nun. The novella combines sections of Vivien's perspective with fictional historical documents detailing parts of the Abbey's past along with fragments of real documents relating to English Catholic history, as Vivien discovers the haunting's origin in the murder of a local 'holy maid' by John's ancestor. At the book's conclusion, it is revealed that the collection of documents we have read have been compiled by Vivien herself as a way of coming to terms with the Abbey's history. She has created the only real dialogue possible between the living and the dead: an archive, to be accessed and interpreted.

Although the ghost at the climax of Landon's story is not inevitable, as I have suggested, I decided not to remove the haunting from my version as a trope of disavowed historical knowledge. Landon's ghost brings to mind the visible victims of the Reformation's violence, often absent from non-fiction representations focusing on England's Protestant modern identity, although such ghosts are mainstays of lurid Gothic descriptions. Jerome de Groot, a critic who, like Korhonen, refers directly to the notion of the archive, suggests that part of the inherent ethical quandary involved in writing historical fiction is that "the historical novelist fudges the actuality of death, substituting instead a comforting fiction that draws the sting of the past, disavows its trauma", and that furthermore, "The reality of the past is found in the pitiless archive; the novel is an attempt at ignoring that actuality" (2016: 34). The deathliness and inherent bleakness of real pasts are, as I have argued, personified in Landon's nun, illustrated in the reader's impossible journey to the guillotine with Danton and Desmoulins in *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), and seen also within the final days of David Oluwale's life in Phillips's "Northern Lights" (2007). However, those same fictions attest that although documented history is in one sense a set of traces of the dead, it is in another sense a means of acknowledging lives in their vivid reality. Accordingly, *The Thorns* incorporates the haunting at

its start rather than its end, although it then refocuses Landon's settings and characters back on the lives silenced in its internalised history by gathering and archiving documents of their existence. In this way, I seek to emphasise the ethical necessity of the archive, however "pitiless" it may be. These documents are, again, sometimes historical and sometimes fabricated, and where I invent documents, I do so because they can only exist in the story's fictional world. My finished manuscript will include a metafictional "editor's note" by Vivien Broughton. The note will serve to explain which documents exist outside the story, echoing the kind of author's note in historical novels that de Groot rightly describes as indicating "the writer's standpoint and to outline how they relate to history, their sense of responsibility to the past, and how they articulate something fictive out of source material that cleaves to a kind of truth" (2016: 31).

I thus rewrite and expand the original story into a novella format in order to find this unnerving nun, her physical existence, her life and death, and the Thurnley Abbey that clearly existed in the world of the text long before the Broughton family. In other words, the new story builds on, as contemporary historical fictions habitually do in the ways I have indicated, the idea of historical discourse as growing out of the "formation of an *archive*" at the basis of what is considered history rather than literature (Korhonen 2006: 12). The novella's fictional components work by organising and framing this archive. This also allows for more critical use of the original's cautionary hints of sixteenth century anti-Catholic persecution and acknowledgement of more recent anti-religious prejudice, providing, I hope, opportunities to empathise with persecuted religious communities around the world and across centuries. As part of the manuscript's tracing of the discursive, creative journey between what Hilary Mantel distinguishes (echoing Kuisma Korhonen) as information and knowledge (2017), *The Thorns* documents the transition of Thurnley Abbey from church to private ownership. This is a destructive, devastating process that leaves behind Abbey ruins, a modern house carrying the name, and documents attesting to processes of destruction and reconstruction. I sought to write about the memory of that former time in a village nearby, where recusant Catholics kept their beliefs after the Reformation, secretly or not depending on the religion of the reigning monarch. I found the bases for some of my fictional documents of this period in

The Cecil Papers, a digitised archive in which post-Reformation, anti-Catholic voices of the sixteenth and seventeenth century are strident and suggest exactly the kind of Foucauldian “animation” giving way to knowledge that I wished to harness using my fictionalised archive. The search term “papist” retrieved many such voices, and as my task was to reconstruct Landon’s story rather than to write another Reformation history, I wrote some of these voices into a picture of Thurnley Village’s recusants.

Catholics were, one letter said, “The worst and most dangerous people in the world” (The Cecil Papers 1602). I noted that while Landon’s John Broughton lived in particular terror of the nun haunting his house, his wife Vivien, “deeply religious in a narrow school” (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 468), although also scared, kept calmer than him. I decided that her family lived in the north and had only renounced their Catholicism at the turn of the nineteenth century. Vivien knows this, and knows there are hollow walls at Thurnley Abbey concealing priest holes, but does not tell her husband. My story records a fictitious interview with her ancestor whose wife was a proud Catholic, upon paying a fine for recusancy to the local authorities:

My wife was baptised in your church, my lords, but as it was before and in the stone font. Blood stood out under her cheek, blistered, they say, but her skin did not break. They said she was marked, God help us. She tells me the tale with pride, my lords. (Bibby 2019: 43)

My writing draws close to the living bodies of Thurnley’s Catholics, in a reversion of the historical accounts’ closeness to their persecuted and sometimes executed bodies. If Landon’s nun is a reference to an anti-Catholic horror of relics – and this seems likely – my portrayal refocuses on those relics as objects of veneration and symbols of Christian resurrection. In the main part of the story, Vivien experiences a kind of double vision when discovering the Abbey’s newly-unlocked rooms and Catholic objects. Knowing that there have been no known Catholic recusants living on the estate since penal times, she imagines instead generations of women with secret faith:

Perhaps there were two of them: wife and daughter, hiding gaudy crosses somewhere, and chalices in tins. They wove the King’s own nightmares around their parlour walls. Their

man might have cut into the Sunday joint as he said, a request and a smile, at first: Give this up, now. (122)

I conclude this part of the article with glimpses of the world of sixteenth century Catholic rebels as these glimpses occurred to me, and as they occur to Vivien in the story, after I “archived” the words of a letter held in the Cecil Papers: “We vehemently suspect...” (1602):

We vehemently suspect: An altar. A garden. A large iron pot. A promise. Soft beds. A doorway, looking outside onto the King’s land. (Bibby 2019: 49)

This homely context is the one in which we see the nun, living and at peace at the close of *The Thorns*. History has folded back on itself as the processes of my writing and the fictitious Vivien’s research compel it to do, although in place of the image of the dead nun, I substitute the living woman. Both, I find, may appear when creative writing seeks to archive traces of the past.

## Conclusion

In this article I have combined my perspectives as academic/critical and creative writer to suggest that fictions can function similarly to archives. This is firstly because, as is true in both historical research and literature, the term ‘archive’ indicates at once a physical or digital collection of historical evidence, the act of collecting this evidence, and the more abstract but crucial concept of the collection of historical “traces” (to borrow Sherwood’s [2019] idea) that gives rise to inevitably imaginative narratives. I have argued that these intertwined ideas are of practical use to writers of new historical fiction because of the ways in which literary and historical discourses work alongside each other to allow for creative investigations into historical narratives, and have applied this idea in my reading of Perceval Landon’s 1908 ghost story “Thurnley Abbey” and my own work-in-progress inspired by it, *The Thorns*. The dead nun’s “[l]ittle regular steps” (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 477) in Landon’s original story break a silence that is as much historiographic and literary as ghostly, calling for more writing to break the silence further. *The Thorns* is an exercise in reasserting what the archive has been and can be beyond a set of

physical spaces, accessible and comprehensible only to professional historians. By constructing a fictitious history for Thurnley Abbey which is rooted in the real, traumatic, and contentious history of English Catholicism, I hope that *The Thorns* will contribute to a body of creative writing that redefines continually the dynamic relationship between the practices of fiction and of historiography, making new archives wherever histories and stories are found.

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## Notes

1. Landon's "Thurnley Abbey" was published originally in a collection titled *Raw Edges* (Heinemann, 1908), is included in *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (Cox and Gilbert, eds. 1991: 466-479), and is included frequently on ghost story blogs.
2. My work towards *The Thorns* began in 2017 as research presented in a paper at the Creative Histories conference at the University of Bristol, and written up as a blog post for *Storying the Past*: <https://storyingthepast.wordpress.com/2017/10/23/criticalcreative-histories-finding-english-catholic-pasts-in-perceval-landons-thurnley-abbey-by-leanne-bibby/>
3. I am grateful to Dr Sophie Nicholls for suggesting this link between stories and rewritings as ghostly, when I presented an early version of this research at Teesside University's School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law's Research Seminar Series in November 2017.

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## About the Author

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# Expanding the Creative Narrative

Why it Matters

Liz Mistry

## ABSTRACT

Idris Elba (2016) and Riz Ahmed (2017) addressed the UK Parliament regarding increased representation and inclusion in the film and TV industries, emphasising the need to embrace “expansive narratives” representative of wider society in terms of age, race, disability and more. This is equally relevant to the publishing industry. Within publishing, in 2018 Penguin Random House adopted an inclusions policy to redress the existing imbalance in representation within the industry, stating; “books shape the culture of society ... too often, culture is shaped by those from a narrow section of society.” 2017 book sales demonstrate that crime fiction (CF) outsells all other genres, making it the most influential contemporary literary form. As a CF author, I employ expansive narratives and argue that, in order to continue shaping and redirecting society’s understanding of cultures beyond the confines of socially-constructed boundaries, CF should embrace wider narratives. My Creative Writing post-graduate research considers these issues and reflects on my creative choices. This article considers inclusion and representation within the CF genre, explores the lack of “expansive narratives” therein, and suggests that, by being more inclusive, the genre has the potential to help shape and redirect perceptions. It also considers the ethics and responsibility of writing the “other.”

As part of my current practice-led Creative Writing PhD, I am researching aspects of my own writing practice. One of the things my research and journaling of my creative practice has revealed is how important representing wider society is to me as a writer. I live in Bradford, a very ethnically diverse city, and I set my books there too. Although representing diverse ethnic communities in fiction and in the arts is imperative, I believe that expanding the creative narrative is wider than that and should incorporate representation of diversity in all its forms. Expansive narratives are all about ensuring that the diversity that already exists in society is included and represented. As Verna Myers a world-renowned inclusion strategist, says; “Diversity is being invited to the party ... inclusion is being asked to dance.” (2015) It is about removing barriers, smashing glass ceilings and implementing policy to enable more equitable representation, inclusion and participation of and in wider society.

From government to educational institutions, to businesses (both private and public), inclusion policies and strategies have become part of everyday life, with initiatives to ensure the equal inclusion and representation of people from diverse backgrounds, including Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME), LGBTQ+, class, age, gender, disability and more. The Home Office document *Inclusive by Instinct* states that, “diversity is about recognising the value of difference” (HO 2018: 4). However, the mere recognition of diversity does not equate to an appreciation of that diversity, nor does it guarantee that it is valued. Furthermore, even recognising the value of difference, inclusion is not necessarily achieved. It is for this reason that the inclusion and normalisation of diversity in all areas is so important.

As Myers states, “Inclusion is inviting you into the mainstream ... [about] having the opportunity to show what you are capable of doing.” (2015) This is about valuing diversity in the workplace within creative industries, and about making sure that the people in the room are representative of wider society. This can, in part, be achieved through policy and, as Idris Elba stated in his address to the UK parliament about addressing inequitable representation of diverse individuals and communities, through “diversity of thought” (2016), and recognising the worth this brings to all of us. In order to ensure inclusivity throughout society, the potential of currently marginalised groups must be progressed in order to achieve more equitable

representation, thus maximising opportunity for all. To this end, the Home Office’s statement on inclusion – “Inclusion is about ensuring we get the best from everyone” (2018: 4), by offering opportunities for under-represented groups, and by removing the barriers for people from these groups – is much more proactive, instead of merely encouraging diversity in the workplace. Its commitment to propagating the potential of that diverse workplace is supported by a strategy to monitor inclusion. Thus, my own academic institution, like all others, has a Diversity and Inclusions Strategy (Leeds Trinity University 2018), while local government, the EU, and businesses are all adopting inclusion policies with the aim of being more representative of society.

Kit De Waal cuts directly to the heart of the issue when she observes that, “the more we reinforce the stereotypes of who writes and who reads, the more the notion of exclusivity is reinforced. It takes balls to gatecrash a party.” (2017) If we are not inclusive, we are leaving people out, denying them opportunities and, as a consequence, are at risk of missing out on talent. If we acknowledge that inclusion is a good thing and that the representation of currently under-represented groups in all areas is a good thing, then it follows that the publishing industry should become more inclusive, and it is important to consider what employing expansive narratives would mean to both readers and authors.

For the reader, expansive narratives would include those stories that sometimes feature characters and storylines that reflect one or more of their identified characteristics; their class, gender, age, gender identity ethnicity, disability, and more. More than that, in an expansive narrative, these characters would sometimes drive the narrative, be the hero, hold pivotal roles in the story and not be portrayed in a stereotypical way. Likewise, expansive narratives would enrich the reading experience by sometimes reflecting and exploring plots, characters and worlds that are significantly different from the reader’s own lived experiences.

For the author, employing expansive narratives offers choice and loosens restrictions on creativity. It allows the author to explore and create characters that do not share their identified characteristics (albeit with the need for consideration of responsibility, research, exploitation and appropriation of voice, which will be discussed in more detail later in this essay), to sometimes be more representative of a diverse



society rather than restricted by their personal lived experiences. If expansive narratives were the norm, the author would not be expected to represent only their identified characteristics in their writing. Stella Duffy echoes this: “I want to write and read work that is as multifaceted as our society. I think it’s vital we write widely and inclusively to help shift publishing from the mostly middle class, mostly white place it is now. Men need to write women knowing that they are writing from a place of privilege – that they are likely to earn more than women and are more likely to be reviewed. White writers need to write BAME characters knowing there are many more white writers published. The same for straight people, and able-bodied people, middle-class people, and on.” (2016). As Patrice Lawrence sums up: “culture is ever changing and in the publishing industry, that should be addressed.” (2018)

In his address to parliament, Idris Elba (2016) highlighted “the disconnect between the real world and the TV world,” and further asserted that by “not reflecting the real world, too much talent is wasted.” Elba’s theme was about changing mindsets, about being imaginative, about being fairer and about holding the industries to account by benchmarking industries’ progress in terms of inclusion. The following year, the address was given by Riz Ahmed who explained the importance of bridging this disconnect; “Every time you see yourself in a magazine, on a billboard, TV, film, it’s a message that you matter. You’re part of the national story; you’re valued; you feel represented.” (2017). He also emphasised how it is not only important to see yourself reflected back through literature or on screen, but how enriching it is for *everyone* to have insight into lifestyles dissimilar to their own, to be able to share and normalise diversity, to broaden perceptions, to challenge misconceptions and to extend everyone’s imagined boundaries beyond the narrow confines of small microcosms. Ahmed sums it up in his conclusion: “The power of stories to allow us to relate to experiences that do not resemble our own is phenomenal. And every time we see those experiences, it reminds us that what unites us is far greater than what divides us. Culture is a place where you can put yourself in someone else’s shoes; and a one size shoe shop just doesn’t make any sense.”

Both addresses focused on the importance of the inclusion of under-represented groups in film and television, but also on how the stories we see on screen and, by extension, in our literature, shape our

culture. The benefits they outlined were for all of society. However, both Elba and Ahmed also spoke about the huge economic influence of the creative industries on culture. The Department of Digital Culture Media and Sport (DCMS 2018) reported that in 2017 the creative industries:

- contributed £101.5bn to the UK economy,
- generated a significantly higher Gross Value Added than Sport, Gambling and Telecoms,
- increased their economic contribution by 53% since 2010,
- were the second highest income generator in the DCMS,
- generated £6bn from the publishing industry.

These figures demonstrate that from film to television, to theatre, to literature, art and music, the creative industries in general are extensive and economically solid, and therefore have the very real potential to shape and direct a wider, more diverse, and therefore more representative narrative. Within this context, the publishing industry generates a sizeable amount of income through literature sales, again pointing to its potential influence in shaping culture through its readership.

Culture plays a key role in shaping how people co-exist in societies. All around us we encounter cultural influences in the form of narratives on the screen, on radio, on social media, in galleries, on walls in the form of public and graffiti art, and in literature that we are asked to invest into socially, emotionally and cerebrally. Problems arise when the discourses we are offered through these avenues are representative of only certain groups that make up society. If cultural narratives exclude groups, they perpetuate a narrow perception of what and who is important to our society; they cause alienation. As Ahmed points out, “when we fail to represent, people switch off. They switch off on telly, they switch off the ballot box, and they retreat to other fringe narratives, which is sometimes very dangerous.” (2017) But it’s more than that; it’s about how society as a whole views groups with whom they may not identify. If diverse experiences are not part of the narratives we encounter culturally, then common understandings, shared experiences and appreciation of diversity is at risk. As Ahmed says, “what’s at stake here is whether or not we will move forwards together, or whether we will leave people behind.” (2017) When non-inclusive narratives thrive at the expense of expansive ones, so too do misunderstanding, mistrust, disharmony, fear, and victimisation. Therefore, it is imperative that we

use all art forms available to normalise expansive narratives, thus eradicating the negative effects that result from exclusion upon both individuals and society as a whole.

E. V. Roberts and R. Zweig usefully define literature as “compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions and analyse and advocate ideas ... literature helps us grow both personally and intellectually.” (2012: 3). As a writer, the concept of literature as being powerful enough to spotlight the essence of society’s morals and practices, to stimulate debate, to broaden horizons and transport us to other worlds, to share lived experiences in order to promote empathy, resonates with me, and I believe that there is no more compelling argument than that for inclusivity in the publishing industry. The current disconnect between the people, groups and lives we are able to read about (what is published and accessible to readers either digitally or physically), and the actuality of our rich, complex and diverse societal make-up, is not only symptomatic of the lack of inclusion in the publishing industry, but also impoverishes us all. With this in mind, I shall now turn to the imbalance in representation of marginalised groups in the creative industries, literature in general, and the crime fiction genre specifically.

### **Inclusion in the Publishing Industry**

In order to actively encourage the publication of more expansive narratives, it is beneficial for the publishing industry itself to be inclusive and representative. However, in recent years there has been an exploration of the publishing industry in terms of diversity, inclusion and representation of many under-represented groups from working class writers, BAME writers, to women and more. A number of reports have considered the make-up of the publishing industry as well as the demographic and cultural diversity of authors signed. There has been discussion around the narratives offered, as well as expectations placed upon authors to produce specific narratives.

Lee and Low Books’ *Diversity in Publishing Baseline Survey* (2015) compiled statistics around race, gender, sexual orientation and disability and discovered that:

- Over 75% of the industry overall were white, women, heterosexual and non-disabled.
- At executive level the percentage of white,

heterosexual and non-disabled increased to over 85%.

- The proportion of women in executive posts fell to only 59%.

The Publishing Industry Workforce survey (2018) also reflects these figures and demonstrates a regional under-representation as well as under-representation in other marginalised groups. It highlighted that the industry has a higher representation of middle-class employees originating from London, with employees from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the North of England being under-represented. A proportionately higher number of executive positions were filled by white male employees. The report also highlighted a sizeable gender pay gap, mainly attributed to policies surrounding unpaid internships and the like. This trend is also reflected in the authors signed up by the larger publishing houses and reinforces the continued need for more proactive strategies to ensure equality, inclusion and representation.

On the whole the data discussed below demonstrates a need for more proactive strategies by the publishing industry in order to redress lack of representation.

### **BAME Representation**

A. Flood’s article in *The Guardian* (2019) criticised the lack of inclusion in the publishing industry, using the Publishing Industry Workforce D&I Survey (PIWDIS) 2018 figures (p.12). The PIWDIS 2018 figures showed that, despite the publishing industry being predominantly London based, where 40.2% of the population identify as BAME, only 11.6% of individuals working in the publishing industry identified as BAME. This is even lower than national statistics, which show that 14% of the overall population identify as BAME. So, it is clear that in terms of BAME representation in employment, the publishing industry is lacking. However, what is more damning is that in comparison with the PIWDIS 2017 figures there has been a decrease of nearly 1.5% of employees from BAME backgrounds. This means that those making the decisions around which authors and/or which novels are published are predominantly white. Although figures were provided regarding the role of women at senior management levels, there were no figures to demonstrate the roles the BAME employees (or for that matter any of the other under-represented groups) occupied within the industry, which makes it unclear how much influence for change could be

asserted by those BAME employees.

Moving on to look at signed authors' experiences of the publishing industry, *The Writing the Future Report* (Spread the Word 2015) highlighted that many barriers existed for BAME authors. Some BAME authors felt that they were expected to portray limited narratives of their cultures, whilst others felt their work was rejected because it didn't tally with white expectation of their writing and many felt they were being shoe-horned into only representing BAME issues in their writing. This illustrates a real barrier to producing expansive narratives. If the authors' offered narratives are rejected, then their stories are devalued, ignored and shut down in favour of the narrow imagined boundaries created by the most prevalent culture. Taking this a step further, if BAME narratives are judged by people who lack the imagination Elba and Ahmed called for in their addresses to parliament, and then rejected on that basis, then we are very much in the remit of a shoe shop where one size is all that's offered. Understandably, some of the authors interviewed expressed discontent at being limited to representing BAME issues in their writing. After all, the whole concept of Creative Writing is to be creative, to produce imaginative writing that explores worlds, so why should any author be limited to explore only their own world?

D. Barrett, in his article "Unusual Suspect: the writers diversifying detective fiction" (2018), highlights the fact that most of the best loved detectives in fiction are white and male, from Sherlock Holmes, to Rebus, and beyond. However, whilst there are a few notable BAME authors in the industry (A. A. Dhand, Dreda Say Mitchell, Patrice Lawrence), this has not translated into a representative increase of inclusion of BAME characters in literature. This again raises the question of whose responsibility it is to ensure that inclusion and representation in our literature is equitable. Clearly, the need to employ more people from BAME backgrounds in the publishing industry at influential levels (editors, agents, publishers) is imperative, as is the need to dip into a wider pool in order to redress the existing imbalance in authors. Alongside this, though, the content of what is published needs to be scrutinised in order to ensure that wider narratives become the norm and are not reliant on restricting our BAME authors to take up the mantle on behalf of their communities.

## **Working Class, Working Class Women and Older Women representation**

The BAME communities are not the only ones under-represented in both the publishing industry and in the authors published. Unfortunately, the PIWDIS (2017 and 2018) has no figures to correlate the class of employees. However, if we look at indications like education, we see that nearly 50% of employees had a degree, 36% had some qualification whilst only 14% had no formal educational qualifications. Of course, this gives a clear picture of educational attainment, it does not necessarily provide an accurate guide to class backgrounds of employees. However, the *Panic! It's an Arts Emergency* (2015) survey demonstrates that people of working-class origin are still being excluded from the creative industries. Specifically, the workplace demographics showed that only 12.6% of those employed in the publishing industry identified as working class.

Some leading literary figures have commented on the barrier to publication for working class people, and specifically working-class women. Kit de Waal's article *Make Room for Working Class Writers* (2018) highlights the fact that the publishing industry is the least socially diverse of all the creative industries, regarding not only class, but also race, gender and age of those who are employed. She observes that, "working-class writers, it seems, must endlessly regurgitate their own life stories – or versions of them – whereas middle-class writers can explore the world, the universe and beyond." This echoes the experiences of BAME writers outlined above. Furthermore, De Waal claims that because of a lack of inclusion, the working-class narratives published lose their authentic voice as they are diluted to suit the narrow focus of the over-represented white, middle-class employees in upper echelons of the industry. Again, this echoes the complaints of some of our BAME writers and substantiates the claim that there is a need for a more diverse workforce in the publishing industry so that the views of wider society can influence publishing choices. In her radio programme discussing *Where Are All the Working Class Writers?* De Waal refers to some of the barriers to becoming an author if you are from a working-class background: "Real equality is when working class writers can write about anything they like – an alien invasion, a nineteenth-century courtesan, a medieval war. All we need is the space, the time to do it – oh yes, and some way to pay the bills." (2017)

Fortunately, the publishing industry is taking the need for inclusion and representation more seriously. The Penguin Random House (PRH) inclusion policy opens with a bold statement: “Books shape the culture of society. They inspire TV shows, films, stage shows, podcasts and more. Yet too often culture is shaped by people who come from a narrow section of society. That needs to change.” (2018) It goes on to express a desire to be more representative of society in terms of employees and the authors they sign by 2025, by taking into account ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social mobility and disability. To back this up, PRH have established various initiatives, such as the #WriteNow project which specifically works with under-represented groups throughout the country to create publishing opportunities. They have also created #PenguinPride, and many educational initiatives have been taken into schools throughout the country to try to make the publishing industry more accessible for young people.

The Harvill Secker and Bloody Scotland (2018) BAME prize for crime fiction offers an opportunity for members of the BAME community to be mentored, and Harper Collins 4<sup>th</sup> Estate imprint gives a route to publishing for BAME authors with their annual short story prize. The Killer Women Mentoring Scheme (2019) funded by Arts Council England and the Working-Class Writers’ Festival (The Bookseller, 2018) planned for 2020, for example, both aim to encourage broader representation amongst authors. However, these initiatives have been met with mixed reactions. Author Lionel Shriver asserts that, “PRH no longer regards the company’s *raison d’être* as the acquisition and dissemination of good books. Rather, the organisation aims to mirror the percentage of minorities in the UK with statistical precision ... literary excellence will be secondary to ticking all those ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual preference and crap-education boxes.” (2018) This infers that a more representative workforce, combined with greater inclusion of authors from under-represented groups and wider narratives reflecting the voices of those authors, somehow diminishes the quality of literature published. It does not account for the possibility that dipping into larger, more varied pools of talent, might actually increase excellence and revitalise an industry which has been slow to respond to changing culture. The implication that because you belong to an under-represented group means that what you offer will be inferior to the existing

cohort of non-representative authors is offensive and illustrates exactly why we need these policies and initiatives. PRH is a commercial business after all and, as demonstrated earlier, wider representation of narratives is economically viable. Beside which, Shriver’s comments are misleading, as within the PRH policy it is stated quite clearly that, “This is an ambition, not a quota. We will always publish – and hire – based on talent, first and foremost.” (2018) The fact that PRH are nurturing marginalised voices in no way infers that their standards have fallen, but rather that they’ve widened the goalposts to allow those voices that are not often heard to have the opportunity to be published. As author Abir Mukherjee asserts, “the playing field isn’t level ... What PRH is doing is making it easier for hugely talented individuals from marginalised parts of our society to have their voices and their stories heard ... this is about better reflecting the world we live in and publishing books that appeal to a wider cross section of society, rather than tokenism or box ticking.” (Flood 2018)

Whilst these positive moves will almost certainly lead to more diverse narratives, I would argue that, alongside this, there is a real need to normalise expansive narratives in the fiction published. Although publishing a wider, more representative cohort of authors will expand the narratives available, the issue is larger than that. It is also about expecting a proportion of all narratives produced to be expansive and that means not relying solely on, for example, gay or black or working-class authors to write these narratives, but to normalise diverse narratives from all writers. As De Waal, Elba and Ahmed argue, it’s about removing barriers for under-represented groups to the creative industries, whilst ensuring that creative choice is not limited to expected narratives. Already in the reports outlined above, writers from marginalised groups have expressed annoyance at being expected to write a certain kind of narrative. It is only by encouraging all writers to embrace expansive narratives that these issues can be addressed.

As creatives, writers are more than able to develop narratives that transport readers to places they may never have visited, through the experiences of characters they may never have met, having encounters they might only be able to imagine: stories that may never be their own, and may reflect societies/lives they have never inhabited. It is the authors’ very special skill – their job – after all.

Therefore, how hard can it be to use our creativity to be more representative of actual society in our narratives and to think and write outside the narrow box of the publishers', authors' and readers' cultural expectations? Clearly, to expect every narrative to be representative of all aspects of wider society would be unreasonable, but to be mindful of how we are representing the worlds we create is integral to proper inclusion, and this requires us to be conscious of the possibilities available to us, to be aware that a diverse society lives beyond the confines of our own worlds and to occasionally dip into that pool to ensure that we are as Ahmed (2017) said, "not leaving anyone behind" whilst opening up access to wider worlds and experiences.

Whilst the discussion above has been about the need for expansive narratives in the creative industries and literature in general, my Creative Writing PhD research is specifically on the need for expansive narratives in the crime fiction (CF) genre and, because my PhD is practice-led, how that impacts on my own writing as an established CF author. CF is the most popular genre in contemporary adult fiction:

- Nielson Book Research (2015) showed that seven of the top ten print books sold and eight of the top ten e-books sold were CF.

The Publishers Association (2016) reported that, of the top 15 borrowed library books for 2015-2016, five were CF and the other ten were children's books. Singh (2018) reported figures from The London Book Fair stating that in 2017 the crime fiction genre outsold all other fiction.

From these statistics it is clear that CF makes an extensive contribution to the creative industry economy and has the potential to be a real cultural influencer if it adopts expansive narratives. CF is also widely accepted as the pre-eminent genre that shines a spotlight on societal injustice, the one that takes up the mantle for the disenfranchised and voiceless. As C. Nickerson (1997) asserts, CF can release "explosive cultural material." This implies that the genre is forward thinking and unafraid to challenge the status quo. In 2020, the explosive cultural material that should be released by the CF community is expansive narratives; narratives that broaden, include and represent society more equitably. Nickerson goes on to note that CF "represent[s] in a generally realistic style the most anxiety-producing issues and narratives of a culture."

(744-745) Renowned crime fiction author Denise Mina states that "crime fiction illuminates, informs and explores societal rupture" (2018), and Sophie Hannah says, "I feel I am writing about ordinary people in the real world – but with the proviso that nobody is really that ordinary." (2019) Whilst in agreement that the genre does indeed address many societal issues, my research indicates that it is sadly lacking in representing many of the "narratives of a culture." The genre is not reflective of broader society, nor is it inclusive in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, gender identity, sexuality, disability, age and more, and on occasion it is stuck in the rut of tokenism, with marginalised characters being presented in stereotypical or two-dimensional ways in subsidiary roles. The number of authors from marginalised groups being signed by publishers, although rising, is still unrepresentative, and the narratives published by the CF community of authors are often not expansive in nature. I would posit that employing expansive narratives would produce an even more realistic and authentic cultural narrative.

Part of my PhD research involved conducting interviews with twenty CF authors. Of the twenty:

- eight (40%) were men and twelve (60%) were women.
- eight (40%) were under forty-five years old, eight (40%) were between 45 and 60 years old and four (20%) were over 60 years old.
- one identified as BAME (5%), nineteen as white (95%)
- three specified they had a disability (15%)
- all identified as heterosexual (100%).

During these interviews, I asked three questions which drew answers that pertained to the notion of inclusivity in CF. The first was: "What draws you to write CF?" The overwhelming majority of responses echoed Mina and Hannah's earlier comments around writing within the genre in order to explore societal rupture and characterisation. There was also a definite emphasis on exploring the psychology of characters (both protagonists and antagonists), the search for resolution and justice, exploring darkness, personal (work life) experience, compulsion to write, conflict, escapism, and an emphasis on the challenge of creating a puzzle. The responses which particularly illuminated the authors' awareness of, or desire to incorporate, expansive narratives included the following:

- "I like to give voice through my work to the voiceless."

- “It’s the last stronghold of the everyday hero, the hero the reader could actually become.”
- “I am interested in the authority of the CF genre to reflect society and to explore issues of political, economic and moral weight.”

Nine of the interviewed authors expressed a desire to *reflect real life*, to give *voice*, to include *credible characters* and to explore *issues and dilemmas*. However, whether these authors would produce expansive narratives would depend on their personal perceptions of ‘real life,’ which is why it is important that there is wider representation within the CF author community. Alongside this, there needs to be a more pro-active response from publishers to ensure that narratives offer wider representation of society, thus sharing the representation responsibility more widely and not only with those from under-represented groups.

One author wanted the reader to identify with the “hero” (I use the term hero in the same way I use the term actor or author; as a unisex term) and believe that they could become that hero. This again raises the question of, if the reader is from an under-represented group, does that hero share any of their identified characteristics? Another author credited the CF genre with having “authority” to reflect society, as if there is an expectation that the genre will do just that, but again this is reliant upon the author’s concept of how society is made up. It seems that it is only by employing expansive narratives that we can effectively deliver the sorts of things the CF authors feel the genre represents; to create heroes that mirror the expectation from the reader that they could one day be that hero, whilst representing wider society and giving voice to the voiceless.

My experience as a reader of CF is that, as a genre, it does to an extent fulfil these expectations. CF does explore societal rupture, spotlight social injustice and give voice to the voiceless. Let us look at a few examples of CF that does just this. Mark Billingham’s *Love Like Blood* (2018) is a novel about “honour killings”. It most definitely spotlights social injustice and gives voice to the disenfranchised characters killed for “dishonouring” their families. *Dead Memories* (2019) by Angela Marsons explores issues around society’s responsibilities to abused and vulnerable children and how fragile their security can be. Both Jane Casey’s *Cruel Acts* (2019) and Brian Freeman’s *The Voice Inside* (2019) scrutinise flaws in the US and the UK justice systems

respectively, and how corruption, politics and the media can exacerbate existing flaws. However, whilst highlighting these very important issues, the narratives are still, to an extent, exclusive. The protagonists are rarely from a marginalised group and, although the overall narratives have a number of BAME characters, none of these characters figure amongst the three protagonists in each novel. Often the marginalised characters are the victims. In two of the examples, the protagonists are women, but in one instance, the woman’s opinion is considered less valid than that of her male counterpart. There are no characters from the LGBTQ+ communities, all protagonists bar one are between the ages of twenty and forty, and none is physically disabled, although two suffer from PTSD.

If we look at one of the most prestigious CF awards, The Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year (2019) shortlist, we can again see this trend perpetuated. Of the six shortlisted novels – Belinda Bauer’s *Snap* (2018), Steve Cavanagh’s *Thirteen* (2018), Mick Herron’s *London Rules* (2018), Val McDermid’s *Broken Ground* (2018), Liam McIlvanney’s *The Quaker* (2018) and Khurram Rahman’s *East of Hounslow* (2018) – only Khurram Rahman identifies as BAME and his is the only novel featuring BAME main characters. Val McDermid is gay and the main character in Liam McIlvanney’s book, based on the real-life Bible John killings, is gay. *Snap* is the only one to feature main characters outside the usual twenty to forty age group, with the main characters being children, whilst McDermid’s *Broken Ground* is the only to feature a female main protagonist. Whilst in no way denigrating the talent of these writers, it seems that at the top of the CF genre there remains a need to include more expansive narratives. In order to break the glass ceilings that authors from under-represented groups come up against, the publishing industry should be both seeking out CF narratives that are more expansive, and pro-actively seeking talent from under-represented groups.

The second of my author questions relevant to expansive narratives was: “Do CF authors have a responsibility to society?” Interestingly, one author responded that their only responsibility was to themselves. Three responded that they had no responsibility to society, but added provisos, such as that they would not write gratuitous violence or use certain language in deference to their readership. One specified that their aim was “to entertain not to

influence” whilst acknowledging that other authors “inject social justice into their work”. One author responded “Absolutely not. We have a responsibility to pull it [society] down”. Some observations from the other fourteen authors who felt they, as writers, had some responsibility to society include:

- “I would never paint a particular group in a negative way ... although I may paint them that way through the eyes of somebody whose values needed to be questioned.”
- “In a nutshell... to portray people in a fair way, challenge prejudice.”
- “CF (and other) authors have an obligation, for example, not to perpetuate damaging stereotypes.”
- “Writers have a responsibility to avoid cliché ... but be true to reality. Not every Muslim is a terrorist. Not every short blond is a dumb victim. Not every politician is corrupt.”

Clearly the desire to “do no harm” and to expose “societal wrongs and social injustice” and not to “perpetuate stereotypes” is very high on the agenda of most of the CF authors interviewed, yet although they intuitively challenged and spotlighted issues leading to inequitable representation, only two made reference to wider narratives by mentioning avoiding stereotypes. However, in order to avoid over-compensation (tokenism) it is important to portray a breadth of characters from marginalised groups. Just because a character is from an under-represented group does not mean they are a “nice” character. This goes back to Idris Elba’s concern about being labelled a “black actor” when he is so much more than that. It’s about being able to represent, for example, a gay man as a villain, because he is not *only* a gay man – he is more than that – and could be a villain, a nurse, a father ... and gay. However, the worry of portraying under-represented characters in a stereotypical way is ever-present, as the last observation showed, and this can be difficult to navigate as a writer.

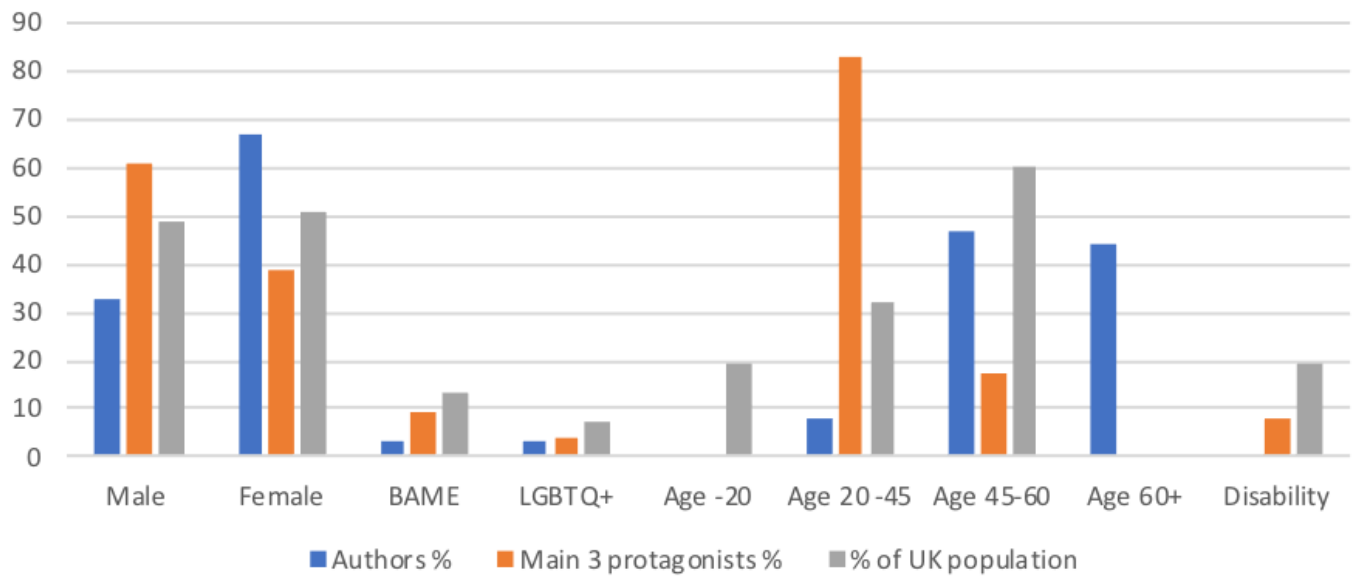
In order to gain more clarification around this, I posed the question: “Do current discussions/debates around, for example, the portrayal of marginalised groups, violence towards women, etc., in CF influence how or what you write?” Six respondents said that they would not be influenced by current debate. One of those cited the fact that not conforming to current “thought” around certain issues could be a barrier to being published. Two

cited their method of writing as “pantsers” (those who do not plot), for ignoring current debate. The three spoke about being true to their writing and not being forced into writing stories which didn’t interest them. These three spoke at length about writing to expose inequality, whether it was fashionable or not. The fourteen who acknowledged being influenced by current debates commented thus:

- “If you want to keep current and authentic, then you must be broadly aware of all possibilities.”
- “Yes, I discuss this a lot with fellow writers.”
- “I’m keen to see people from the BAME community represented accurately and not placed in stories where the fact that they are BAME is the purpose of them being in the story.”
- “Representation is important, good representation is imperative.”
- “I often cover controversial topics that a lot of authors would shy away from, but these things happen in everyday life and I can use my voice to bring attention to these things.”
- “I’m in a position to expose corruptions, abuses, conspiracies and social injustices that happen in real life.”
- “I tend to focus on domestic violence and misogyny as themes ... there is still more work to do in creating awareness around these sensitive subjects.”
- “As a feminist I do make a conscious effort to ensure my work subverts the stereotypical victim trope.”
- “I do intentionally try to explore social issues in my writing – especially the disempowerment of women.”
- “Yes, I don’t know if it’s entirely true that CF is now a radical genre (plenty of it remains very conservative) but it does provide a vehicle for exploring the experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised groups.”
- “Many of my books try to give expression to the experiences of disenfranchised groups or individuals.”
- “It is inevitable that the debate around different groups has an impact on writing. I think the exploration of this can be a good thing.”

From these responses it is clear that representation is a consideration among CF authors, with how BAME and women characters are represented in CF being the groups most cited. Interestingly, the author who identified as BAME made the BAME

## Comparison between % representation of authors, characters within novels and national UK statistics in the groupings below.



observations, whilst one of the authors mentioning the disempowerment of women was male. This is perhaps an indication that being in an under-represented group makes it more likely that an author will consider representation of that group. Although oppressed, disenfranchised and different groups are mentioned in loose terms, there is very little indication of which precise groups the authors questioned are referring to. On the whole, the interviewed authors are socially aware, try to represent broader society and the issues faced by marginalised groups, and are committed to giving voice to marginalised groups. However, if inclusion and representation of diversity is focused mainly on women and the BAME communities, what are the implications for other marginalised groups who still remain excluded? If we are not fully inclusive, then we are still leaving people behind: their narratives are not being told, their experiences not validated. This brings into question the way in which under-represented voices are created. Are the narratives about marginalised groups as victims, peripheral or marginalised characters, or are they about the marginalised groups being represented as equals – the “heroes”, if you will? If the former, then there is still work to be done. The need to encapsulate, as a matter of course, inclusive narratives, with members of marginalised groups playing the leading roles, is pressing. This is especially true if CF is to continue to be the genre that represents contemporary society in a realistic way.

To illustrate this point, I looked at available statistics relating to authors, and compared this to the representation of the main three characters from all 36 novels I have read thus far this year (note: not all novels had three identifiable main characters) and compared that to the national statistics outlining percentages for each of the groupings used. Of the 36 authors, 12 were male, 24 were female, one identified as BAME, one, to my knowledge, was gay, 16 were over 60, 17 were between 45 and 60, and three were between 20 and 45.

The 36 novels comprised:

- 18 traditional detective novels, although three of these were not police procedurals. Of the three, two were private detective novels and one was a cross between a police procedural and an amateur detective, with the main character being an anthropologist. Five of these had two main characters and a sidekick. One of the main characters was the detective (white, under 45 and straight), the other was the female serial killer (again under 45 and straight), the third was the black detective sidekick.
- 13 urban gothic vampire cross-genre amateur detective books (binge-read as research for a blog article).
- Three psychological thrillers; two with a female main character and one with a male main



character.

- One described as literary crime fiction.
- One Asian cosy crime novel.

This is what I found:

Looking more closely at the roles of the different characters within the books, we see clearly that even where there is inclusion of a member of an under-represented group, that character is mostly not the main narrative driver. For example, none of the four LGBTQ+ characters represented are main characters, nor is the one character with a physical disability. Out of the nine BAME characters, only two are main characters, one of which is a woman and is represented by a male BAME author writing a female BAME character. The other BAME characters are sidekicks to the main white characters. Incidentally, of the main BAME characters portrayed in the novels, only three are women. Of the seventeen main characters over the age of 45 only three are lead characters and I noticed a propensity for the older sidekick to be the calming influence on the younger, more charismatic, usually male, detective. None of the characters in any of the books identifies as anything other than gay, lesbian or heterosexual, demonstrating a lack of representation for the rest of the LGBTQ+ community and, more importantly, a lack of discourse around the issues of gender and sexual identity.

It is worth noting that five of the novels read were identified, by the authors, as being feminist novels, a further 13 novels were from an urban gothic vampire series, featuring a female main character, and three of the novels featured strong female lead characters, yet this still did not bring the representation of women in CF in line with UK population statistics. Furthermore, of the eight characters with a disability, only one of those had a physical disability and the others suffered from mental health issues. Whilst pleasing to see mental health awareness in fiction, what is the message to those with other disabilities and/or invisible disabilities? In terms of the victim pool in these novels, it is notable that:

- In all of the novels there are themes where women or girls were victims. However, to unpick this a little more, it is important to be aware that in nine of these, the women become empowered during the course of the novel. Issues such as male privilege, domestic abuse, gaslighting, rape, child trafficking, honour killing and terrorism are addressed in the

various narratives.

- In two of the novels there are only male victims.
- Most victims are under 45 years old
- In nine novels the victims are children, and a further 25 novels feature victims in their twenties. Only two novels feature victims over the age of 45.
- In 11 novels the victims are from BAME communities

These statistics demonstrate that if you are young, female reader you are more likely to see characters like you end up in CF novels as victims than as heroes. Although the represented CF novels feature no under 20-year olds as main characters, representation of this age group as victims rises remarkably. If you're a reader over the age of 45 you're unlikely to see yourself represented as either a victim or a hero and this appears to be true of the LGBTQ+ community, although the chances of a reader seeing characters similar to you portrayed as a victim if you're from the BAME community is fractionally higher. However, if you're a man between the ages of 20 to 45, you're more likely to be a hero with the chances of you being a victim being negligible. In sum, then, this indicates that disenfranchised groups of society, when reading CF, will be unlikely to see people with their identified characteristics portrayed. Expansive narratives would balance this out, ensuring that diverse readers, whilst being able to experience vicariously cultures, worlds and lifestyles different to their own, would also sometimes be able to see their identified characteristics reflected back at them in a variety of ways.

In terms of authorship, the statistics indicate that it is not only the BAME authors who are representing BAME characters in their writing. Although on the whole the authors gave strong, three-dimensional representation of their characters, I was disappointed that one white author referred in their novel to one of the BAME characters as "exotic". If this description had come from the viewpoint of a character with little cultural awareness, the description could have been used to emphasise this aspect of their worldview. However, it wasn't; it was from the viewpoint of a main character who was very culturally aware.

Not every CF novel needs to represent all aspects of society. However, if the default is to perpetuate

the clichéd, hetero, young, white, male protagonist, then we, as writers, are missing the opportunity to incorporate the richness that expansive narratives bring to our writing, to vitalise wider society by exploring narratives that can take both author and reader out of our comfort zones and stretch perceptions of what people should or can do. Relating this back to the answers elicited from the author interviews, this begs questions concerning how effectively CF authors are addressing their previously stated aims of:

- “challenging stereotypes”
- giving “good representation”
- using our voices to “bring attention to these [controversial topics] things”
- exposing “social injustice”
- “subvert[ing] the stereotypical victim trope”
- exploring “the disempowerment of women”
- exploring “the experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised groups”
- “challenging prejudice”
- “not to perpetuate damaging stereotypes”
- “making sure tough subjects aren’t brushed under the carpet”
- giving “expression to the experiences of disenfranchised groups or individuals”
- “avoid[ing] cliché”

This brings us back to the function of literature to, on the one hand, sometimes mirror *all* of us and, at other times, to introduce us to others’ experiences.

Whilst initiatives like the Penguin Random House policy will ultimately lead to a more diverse workforce in the publishing industry, that alone will not expand the narratives. Fortunately, the increase in initiatives for BAME and working-class authors, as mentioned previously, LGBTQ+ initiatives, and Penguin Random House’s Write Now initiatives to mentor regional talent from under-represented groups are opening up avenues for writers from marginalised groups to break through the barriers in order to become published. In the last five years the CF world has seen a rise in BAME authors being published, for example, AA Dhand (Transworld Publishers), Abir Mukherjee (Penguin Random House), Alex Khan (Hera books) Khurram Rahman (Harper Collins HQ), and Vaseem Khan (Hodder & Stoughton). The range of publishers publishing BAME authors indicates a change in direction towards more expansive narratives. However, it appears that representation of BAME women CF authors is poorer with Zia Abdullah (Harper Collins

HQ), Dreda Say Mitchell (Bloodhound Books) and Dorothy Koomson (Headline books) being among the few to break into CF publishing. Clearly the publishing world is taking note, not only of who it employs, but also of the authors’ narratives they are publishing. Penguin Random House’s pledge that their “new hires and the books we acquire will reflect UK society by 2025” (2018) shows a commitment not only to a greater representation of society in terms of who they employ, but a greater representation of wider society in the narratives they publish. By extending the remit to include more expansive narratives, and by having manuscripts scrutinised by employees with wider experiences, the expectation of more representative narratives will increase. This will ensure that under-represented groups do not alone carry the burden of creating inclusive narratives to represent themselves but are free to explore their creativity with the knowledge that wider more representative narratives are not only being valued and sought after but published too. Expansive narratives are the only way forward to ensure better representation without pigeonholing authors from specific groups and restricting their creative practice.

However, alongside this, the subject of appropriation of voice must be considered. In no way should expansive narratives replace the creative industries’ commitment to equitable representation of marginalised groups being published. On the contrary, expansive narratives should complement equitable representation. However, issues surrounding identity politics and appropriation of voice in fiction – brought to a head by Lionel Shriver at the Brisbane Writers Festival (2016) and Yassmin Abdel-Magied’s response to it (2016), along with Anthony Horowitz’s claims, as reported by Kean (2017), that he was asked not to write black characters, and Boyne’s (2019) response to criticism about his transgender narrative – cannot be ignored. Indeed, it is a nuanced and delicate subject, which necessitates a degree of sensitivity, authorial responsibility and a deep knowledge that, as authors, the privilege we have to write a vast array of characters must be tempered by the duty to be responsible in the ways in which we do this. Kit De Waal describes it thus, “We have to ask ourselves who we are and what we are trying to say in speaking as ‘the other’. What are we trying to accomplish in our writing that needs that perspective? Are we the best person to say it? Have we examined our privilege and our attitudes sufficiently to give us the necessary perspective to be authentic, sympathetic and true?”

Are we sure that we are not dabbling in exotica, in that fascination with the other that prevents us portraying a rounded, rich culture with all its nuances, diversity and reality?" (2018)

With this in mind, I addressed the issue of appropriation of voice during the author interviews with the question: "What are your feelings about appropriation of voice in creative writing in general?" One author declined to answer the question, two more seemed to be unaware of any political dimension to the question, one understood the question to be about the use of first or third person narration, and one gave the example of a CF author who, in their opinion, had appropriated an African woman's voice badly. The words *inevitable*, *necessary*, *unavoidable* and *appropriate* were used a total of seventeen times, indicating that overwhelmingly the need to write in other voices was an integral part of the craft. However, most authors provided further detail to their answers:

- "I certainly wouldn't presume to write something that sits within another culture unless I was sure I was well enough informed to do it and that it was fair representation."
- "one of the most satisfying aspects of the creative process is adopting or representing the other."
- "... in depicting a different culture or identity any writer should take the responsibility seriously."
- "I try to represent my characters fairly and convincingly."
- "Writers need to do their homework to avoid harmful stereotypes."
- "Research is key. Understanding different cultures is key."
- "I would like to see some of those voices tell their own story."
- "The vast majority of writers are white and middle class. I seek to represent the world as I see it, so I write about people of different colours, religions and backgrounds. That's what authors do."
- "Appropriation of voice is inevitable in fiction."
- "If you couldn't write about anyone else, there would only be one story left – your own. You need to write what you want."
- "We must move into areas beyond our knowledge, understanding and expertise."
- "My feeling is that 'appropriation of voice' is a modern-day concern which should actually concern none of us."

- "Perfectly fine as long as necessary research has been done."
- "[Authors] sometimes get accused of not including minority groups in their writing but when they do, they are in danger of being accused of misrepresenting such groups. I think it's important to be inclusive but like any subject matter, it has to be handled sensitively."
- "As long as the voice is done in a professional manner that has been adequately researched and stays true to the voice then authors can do it very well."
- "I'm uncomfortable when authors appropriate material from other cultures for exploitative or meretricious reasons."
- "If writers were only allowed to write from within their own experience, the scope of fiction would be very limited."
- "If a writer chooses to write from another perspective... then they have an obligation to take the process seriously."

The overall emphasis was that appropriation was necessary in order to provide diverse narratives, but that alongside this the author has an obligation to research, to be sensitive, not to misrepresent, and to be accurate. Some authors used terms like "fair representation," "responsibility," "sensitivity," "obligation to take the process seriously," and "professionalism," as well as stressing the need for research. These responses led me to consider who would be the adjudicator for all these concerns. Who would decide if the representation was fair or sensitively handled, or adequately researched, or exploitative? We have Ahmed and Elba pointing out the benefits of inclusive narratives and alongside that we have a publishing industry that is addressing the issue of under-representation of marginalized groups in the workplace and amongst authors, whilst pledging to publish more expansive narratives representative of wider society. Meanwhile we have notable authors like Lionel Shriver dismissing concerns over both appropriation of voice and the initiatives to redress the imbalance, whilst other authors, like Kit de Waal embrace these initiatives. It's hardly surprising then that CF authors are wary when it comes to creating characters from marginalised groups. As a result of this, the representation of marginalised groups in CF is still poor, which brings into question the CF community's assertion that this genre is the one that most represents society.

Despite the overall lack of representation of marginalised groups in CF, there has in recent years been an encouraging move by some authors to embrace more expansive narratives. With the ongoing presence of more aged characters like Ian Rankin's Rebus and Mark Billingham's Thorne, we see heroes well into middle age, who have aged with their authors. The introduction of Robert Galbraith's disabled character Cormoran Strike, Tony Forder's DI Bliss who suffers from Meniere's disease, and Alison Morgan's character in *Fat Chance* (2019) who has bipolar disorder, demonstrates that more disabled characters are appearing in CF. In terms of the LGBTQ+ communities, one of my own characters in *Last Request* (2019) is gay, and A. M. Peacock's main character is not only gay but also an older man, whilst Keri Beevis' main character in *The Darkness Beneath* (2017) is lesbian, and Patricia Dixon's character in *They Don't Know* (2018) is asexual. There's a host of capable female protagonists, from Angela Marson's Kim Stone to my own Alice Cooper, and many representing BAME main characters from my own DS Nikki Parekh, DC Sajid Malik and DI Gus McGuire, to Vicky Newham's Maya Rahman.

Having read all of these novels, I would consider the diverse characters to be well-researched and sensitively portrayed. I myself research carefully before portraying any character I have no lived experience of and, speaking to other writers, as well as the additional information gained through my author interviews, this appears to be the case for most authors. The point is that authors are used to researching in order to portray characters vastly different from themselves; for example, how many CF authors are serial killers or murderers? Authentic character development is an integral part of the craft that good authors have developed over time. Like all genres of fiction, CF is held up to scrutiny by its readership, literary critics, the publishing world and other authors. This makes authors accountable for their writing and it is their responsibility to ensure they have carried out the groundwork when they represent characters with different experiences to their own lived ones. The concept of accountability is further discussed by Chris Cleave: "readers are mostly ignored in this debate (appropriation), but the worldly and widely read reader has a hinterland, is quick to spot an agenda and is willing to call out fakes. Readers are more heterogeneous than writers will ever be and in their multiplicity a book finds its measure of truth" (2016).

It is not only about detailing and spotlighting issues faced by these groups, it is about empowering these groups by sometimes reflecting them as the heroes, the solvers, the ones who make a difference, the aspirational leaders that readers can look up to. Writing expansive narratives is something I actively pursue in my novels and by actively trying to avoid stereotypes and by considering the implications of my writing, by taking responsibility for my narratives and characterisation, I aim to be more representative of wider society. After all, I no more want to always write about a fifty some, working class, Scottish, white woman than the readership wants to read only one narrative and there is evidence to support this assertion.

Author, blogger, reviewer and reader, C. S. O'Conneide said the following of my character DS Nikita Parekh: "We also need more characters of colour, or ethnicity or whatever you want to call not writing books about a whole bunch of white people of privilege. Nikki Parekh is neither white nor privileged. She's of dual heritage and lives on a housing estate where sleazy punks try to get her nephew to deal molly. Throughout the book she comes into contact with people of varying cultural backgrounds, sexual preference, and social standing. That makes for a rich human landscape in a novel. But here's the best part — there's not one cliché across that panorama. This is what makes this gritty noir particularly scenic, it's realist painting of a life mosaic that includes more than one view." (2019) In the same vein, actor, and narrator of the audiobook of *Last Request* (2019), Shaheen Khan tweeted, "It was my absolute pleasure to narrate #LastRequest. Fantastic to have had the opportunity to play a range of fabulous characters and wonderful to have a strong, complex Asian female lead at the heart of the thriller. Thank you Liz Mistry" (2019).

Kit De Waal states that, "As writers we have to be the other – without it we would have no literature, no great stories, no murder mysteries, no great romances, no historical novels, no science fiction, no fantasy – but when we become the other we need always to act with respect and recognise the value of what we discover, show by our attitudes and our acknowledgements that we aren't just appropriating but are seeking to understand." (2018). This is what expansive narratives can do, and if the CF genre does this then Nilsson's assertion that "Crime fiction [is treated] as a significant participant in the

international sphere of world literature,” because it “offers a particularly rich area of inquiry,” with “bestselling genre fiction fully illustrat[ing] what Marx and Engels enticingly describe as world literature’s “intercourse in every direction” (2017: 2) remains true, with CF evolving with changing culture and producing “intercourse” in the form of expansive narratives that extend beyond the readers’ experiences and represents wider society.

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## About the Author

**Liz Mistry** is in the final year of her PhD creative writing research at Leeds Trinity University. As a bestselling crime author based in Bradford, her work embraces diversity and inclusion through her use of expansive narratives. Liz has five published crime fiction novels and the first in a new series of novels, *Last Request*, will be published by Harper Collins HQ in October 2019. Her PhD novel *Unseen Evil* will also be published later in the year. Liz's practice-led research includes considering how current debate around cultural appropriation sits with the representation of marginalised groups in fiction and specifically considers the absence of the teen voice in adult crime fiction. Liz teaches Creative Writing and has presented her research at the National Association of Writers in Education annual conferences, the University of Central Lancashire, the international crime fiction conference: Captivating Criminality, and at UK literature festivals, including Bloody Scotland, Book Week Scotland, and Bradford, Huddersfield, Ilkley and Portsmouth Literature Festivals.





# Writing Science-as-Fiction

to examine practice-led research in  
creative writing as science communication

Sean Fitzgerald

## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to outline how practice-led research provided the methodological focus for a recently completed doctoral study in creative writing as science communication. A selection of the findings is presented within this review document to offer a flavour of the processes involved and the approaches taken, delivered together with excerpts of creative practice, to illustrate how the critical element combines with the creative to produce a practice-led research outcome. The doctoral study examines how the representation of scientific knowledge can be critically explored through creative writing grounded in science and specifically, in this case, genetic science. The practice element is presented as a linked collection of genetic science-inspired speculative fiction in the form of two novelettes and one novella. These works present opportunities to explore scientific, ethical and moral issues within an area of contemporary-facing genetic science through fiction. As objects of creative production, these works offer the experience of engaging with science-related characters as they pursue their goals. This approach allows investigation through a range of methods to examine the creative process from a critical perspective using practice-as-research methodology. Through this exploration a critique is delivered on the influence of science in the design and writing of the collection.

## Introduction

This research study examines how the representation of scientific knowledge can be explored through creative discourse, proposed through the writing of original fiction. In employing a practice-led approach, a collection of genetic science-inspired fiction has been written, in the form of two novelettes and a novella [1]. This practice is presented as a themed or linked collection of fiction stories: two novelettes (“The Commuter Lab” and “The Patient Experiment”), and one novella (*A Common Thread*). This thematic collection of content-linked stories is intended to present readers with a thought-provoking experience, whilst offering the opportunity to explore scientific, ethical and moral issues within the area of contemporary-facing genetic science. The writing offers a chance to examine up-close aspects of scientific and genetic laboratory practice, through original fiction. The activity of science (specifically genetics) and the generic processes associated with engaging in an empirical investigation, are explored as constituent elements of the individual stories. Through the writing of contemporary fiction, the narratives are presented as taking place in familiar, recognisable and relatable environments.

The initial focus of the research study has been to create science-inspired stories that deliver a selection of contemporary issues in genetic science. These works offer an insight into a range of the processes involved in genetic science, through a collection of engaging characters within accessible formats. This has enabled the interrogation of genetic science through a body of original creative practice, as wholly integrated, complete pieces of fiction. The motivation for this approach is two-fold: from a creative perspective, it is designed to bring an appreciation of the issues and processes of genetic science into works of general fiction, and from an academic perspective, it offers a selection of work to consider how to approach this delivery without resorting to either overt didacticism or over-simplification, and further offers the opportunity to interrogate pieces of science-as-fiction from inception to completion.

The central goal of this study is to investigate and question (through creative practice) whether (and how) the form of fiction can be employed to represent the empirical nature of science, scientists and the processes of undertaking science (including genetic science), through contemporary factual-based fictional characters and stories. As an integral part of this, the research further seeks to offer through applied practice an insight into potential

methods and approaches for using factual scientific material as the driver and content for creative practice.

Within the investigation, production of the fiction exists within a critical context of science in society and considers how contemporary writers utilise science—sometimes as a plot device, sometimes in the guise of a character, sometimes as a backdrop to the main story—in an effort to provide heightened dramatic tension that the inclusion of a science element can often bring to a story. This integration of recognisable science within fiction (whether contemporary or near-future speculation) can often bring with it both an appreciation but also a mistrust of science and technology. This duality can be illustrated through John Steinbeck’s biologist character “Doc” (based on Steinbeck’s friend and marine biologist, Ed Ricketts) in both the *Cannery Row* (1945) and *Sweet Thursday* (1954) novels, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s notion of human farms (illustrated through the experiences of the central characters of Kathy H., Ruth and Tommy) in *Never Let Me Go* (2005). For these examples the undertaking of science (and its consequences) has benefits and drawbacks, depending on who the character is. In an original story, “The Patient Experiment”, this duality is illustrated through Dr. Balfe’s actions. He feels mistrust towards the research facility where he is employed but realises that he is also in a unique position to bring compassion and comfort towards his patient, TP.

A critically-facing component of the study addresses issues such as the accuracy of an author’s approach to science (including associated technologies), the ways in which contemporary writers have used science in fictional narratives, and how the elements of science, technology and fiction can be viewed in the context of a late 20<sup>th</sup> century (and early 21<sup>st</sup> century) philosophical and socio-political perspective. The critical work also investigates whether concerns about the validity of both the scientific content and context are necessary, as the original stories and the science-as-fiction published works cited in this study, are ultimately works of fiction (albeit set in a recognisable and familiar landscape).

## Approaching a mixed methodology

There are two major elements to this research study. Firstly, there is the creation and critique of a body of original creative writing in the form of three stories (two novelettes and one novella). Secondly, a critical element that includes an evaluation of practice-led

research as an analytical tool, developing a creative-critical approach to practice, and a consideration of that practice in a wider context of genre and non-genre writing.

As part of this critical element, an overview of a close-analytical study undertaken on Andrea Barrett's *Ship Fever* collection (1996) is presented. It is the work on this analysis that led directly to the development of the study's strategic creative-critical approach. The development of this was driven by necessity, as a suitable way of analysing science-as-fiction texts in an attempt to gain an insight into how they were written, constructed and whether there were any commonalities. A decision was taken to create a tailored approach, and so a set of criteria with which to examine various aspects of the writing, structure, character construction and the integration of the science involved, was devised. The resultant findings were introduced into the preparation work for the original creative practice, in order to instruct and inform its science content and storyline research, and the drafting, writing and editing of the pieces.

After completing some of the early stories in the collection—not all the fictions that were developed and written went on to be included in the final study—it was decided to evaluate this work critically using the tailored analytical approach with a view of applying a revised set of criteria to one of the collection, and one of Barrett's pieces. This became the basis for a comparative study between one original fiction (“The Patient Experiment”) and one from Barrett's collection (“Birds With No Feet”). The groundwork of this comparative study greatly influenced the shape and approach of the main research study. The comparative study itself is subject-specific and probably has a limited direct application outside of this approach. However, the reason for undertaking the comparison was to provide a measure in order to develop original practice along similar lines to achieve similar outcomes, and even though the practice collection is very different from Barrett's, they share common factors (as illustrated in the full results of the comparative analysis).

Cultivating a creative-critical approach across the research study has proved to be a very useful methodological addition. It has enabled an appreciation of how creative work can interact with a critical understanding to provide a wider scope for understanding how elements of the practice content affect aspects of the critical. An example of this would be how the depiction and exposition of

complex laboratory processes in “The Commuter Lab” may affect the reception of that information i.e. how the level of technical language could influence engagement with the story.

This leads into the main line of enquiry with this study: Through the production of creative practice-as-research, how do the stories in the collection explore implications and effects of genetic science in society, as they attempt to (re)present them as fictionalised but recognisable, contemporary and sometimes speculative scenarios? This approach allows the investigation of science through producing a body of original fiction utilising a range of methods including a creative-critical one. In addition, there is one further critical aspect that is addressed through the practice-led research, one that was touched on earlier with the question of “validity”: whether any of the contextual issues about how science is employed in narrative fiction are important or constructive considerations, as they are after all, works of fiction. It is argued that this *is* an important consideration and is something that can be examined in the light of real-world events. As a direct illustration, there is a fictional scenario in “The Commuter Lab” that speculates on the covert collection of personal information through a mobile (gaming) app in a relatively transparent but underhanded way. This directly reflects the recent Facebook and Cambridge Analytica debacle that unfolded during 2017 (a few years after “The Commuter Lab” was originally written)[2] and as such, it can be seen how fiction can be premonitory, as science (technology) and fiction travel down the same route, albeit on different tracks.

### **Writing science as creative practice**

From the perspective of the original practice, genetic science has been primarily used as a “theme” rather than creating narrative fictions necessarily about science or scientists. The stories are generally character-centred, situated both in a recognisable (Western European) society and in recognisable scientific environments (i.e. either in a “laboratory”, “medical facility” or “field” setting). The core aim of this research is to investigate if and how fiction can be successfully employed to present the empirical nature of science, scientists and the processes of undertaking genetic science. A key methodology employed by this study is the development of practice-led research designed to deliver a collection of “speculative fiction” that brings together fictional scientific characters, their personal and scientific experiences, and a variety of accessible factually

based science and genetic science content. It is hoped with this collection of stories, the processes of science—specifically genetic science—will be delivered in a clear manner that will engage readers to follow both the narrative and the science with equal interest.

The collected practice is referred to as speculative fiction and, from the perspective of genre, is not regarded as (wholly) either science-fantasy or science fiction. The speculative element comes from how the ideas (theories) and technology are employed (through the characters). In speculative fiction the ideas (theories) and technology exist in the present. The original writing—in the collection—explores and exploits how, why and where these might be employed. Margaret Atwood (2005) suggests that science fiction and speculative fiction are two entirely different approaches to writing fiction: one is the future, of things which are imagined, and the latter is based on concrete ideas or technologies which are presently at hand (in a contemporary society). In considering the approach followed by the collection, this strongly aligns with Atwood's assertion that speculative fiction is a discrete approach, as it is based on elements that have their basis in fact, in the here and the now. However, it is inescapable that in reality, the collection will just as likely be categorised as science fiction, and for that reason, Adam Roberts' definition of the genre in his text, *Science Fiction*, is used as a fitting descriptor of the collected work, as that belonging to: "...a genre or division of literature [that] distinguishes its fictional worlds to one degree or another from the world in which we actually live: a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality." (2000: 1).

In regard to the specific content focus of the research study, *New Scientist* writer Philip Cohen succinctly introduces the field of genetics as "...the study of how our physical and behavioural traits are inherited" (2006: 1). While this might seem like an over-simplification, the enormity of the field and the possibilities it offers—for fiction—are infinite. Although a selective field was chosen for the main research study rather than approach it from a generalised topic of "science", it is still representative of science and the processes of science. The decision to concentrate on genetic science was taken for two key reasons. Firstly, driven from a mix of personal interest and professional concern, the rapidly developing nature of genetic science means it is a fertile ground for contemporary characters, situations and storylines. Secondly, there is a high potential for producing research practice that has

direct contemporary relevance, as developmental genetic science and technology increasingly impacts on individual everyday lives.

The enterprise of genetic science, specifically those activities associated with areas of engineering, technology and human medical research, present many possibilities for creative story ideas. The subject-specific content offered by the science of genetics and genetic engineering inspired the practice collection, as the science proved consistently topical and very much an integral part of twenty-first century living. This combination provided an opportunity to produce a body of relevant and dynamic work written about, and aimed at, a contemporary society.

### **Practice-led research**

From writing within a literature of ideas and possibilities, a "What if?" method allows the questioning of science and resulting technologies to act as a catalyst to prompt thought and debate. These "What if?" scenarios in the creative work are designed ultimately to be works of fiction that allow speculation about contemporary ideas in genetics. Lisa Tuttle in *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* considers this ability to ask the "What if?" question from within a "...literature of ideas, of wonder and speculation" (2005: 3) that is often prevalent in speculative fiction and science fiction stories (but not exclusively so). Tuttle's key observation on this "What if?" question underpins the developmental approach to the individual stories in the practice collection. The science behind the majority of the fictionalised scenarios is being applied authentically, so there is scope for the stories to act as a focus for the discussion of genetic science and allows a contemplation on how this may impact in the (very) near-future.

As an integral component of this practice-led research, the approach to writing fictional worlds (albeit ones based on various contemporary locations and recognisable backgrounds), has required accuracy, both in the development of storylines and in the ideas and progress of science issues contained within the stories. Without this attention to detail the fiction pieces would fall short of what was expected of them. In concentrating on whether the requirement for presenting an accurate scientific process is relevant or not, it does open up possibilities of how this issue could be useful in communicating features of science, as it provides an opportunity for dialogue. It allows for ideas about

new and proposed aspects of science to be aired and debated before the hard choices of reality have to be made.

Throughout this study, there has been a constant commitment to represent science and genetic science in a factual light, through a fictional lens. Part of this responsibility comes from recognising that the (mis) understanding of science can have repercussions. The media portrayal of science is often directly relevant to this situation, as its commentary carries meaning and weight in a population's perception of science and associated technologies[3]. With the stories it was held important that the relevance and validity of the science was able to be established through *how* the fictional portrayal measures up against the “hard”[4] science and genetic science breakthroughs, developments and applications in the everyday.

The ideas and stories in the practice collection are aimed at audiences who are receptive to creative possibilities, who will consider what they read and how these ideas may impact on themselves, in contemporary and near-future setting. The stories and story-worlds have purposefully been kept within the realms of current and recognisable environments, to assist in heightening their dramatic impact—and again, relevance—and to relate the body of work as pieces of contemporary fiction. Although at first look, elements of the stories in the collection could be regarded as science fiction or science-fantasy, the aim is not to categorise them in that way. As discussed earlier, the works are primarily speculative science-as-fiction, and to consider them otherwise could offset the full impact that this on-going practice approach has the potential to achieve.

Within the individual stories of the collection, “scientific enquiry” is both linked to the object[5] (specifically the “characters” of TP in “The Patient Experiment” and Judith in *A Common Thread*), and to the subject[6] of those individual fictions. The approach used in writing the fiction offers, as a feature of the storyline(s), the chance both to sample a taste of participating in a (fictitious) scientific enquiry, along with the experience of what it would be like to be at the centre of that enquiry too, through empathy with specific characters and their environments.

At the time of embarking on the practice-led study, a satisfactory outcome of the research practice would have been to produce a work of fiction that constructively engaged non-specialist readers with aspects of genetic science and general

scientific principles, processes and characters, in an entertaining and thought-provoking manner.

One of the main concerns in achieving the above outcome for the practice has been—and still is—to represent an empirical scientific process, that stands up to professional scrutiny, which offers a reader stories that are not didactic in nature but are informative and are able to be engaged with as contemporary fiction. To achieve anywhere near this goal has not been straightforward. The following quote from Michael Crichton appears at the start of *The Andromeda Strain*. It succinctly encapsulates the path that has attempted to be navigated:

This is a rather technical narrative, centring on complex issues of science. Wherever possible I have explained the scientific questions, problems and techniques. I have avoided the temptation to simplify both the issues and the answers, and if the reader must occasionally struggle through an arid passage of technical detail, I apologize.  
(Crichton 1969: 12)

From a formal academic perspective, this practice-led approach has delivered a “non-standard” creative writing-as-research outcome (i.e. in comparison to a literary novel, a genre novel or a screenplay, etc.) and as such, the resultant output combines a mixture of genre and literary forms, in a collection comprising novelettes and a novella. The term “non-standard” is applied as the creative work bridges literary and genre fiction and could be considered as either a hybrid of the two standard approaches or occupying a space somewhere in-between.

### **Presenting the research practice**

As the collection contained stories of mixed lengths, there was some thought given to re-formatting and “repackaging” the individual pieces as defined episodes or sequences, to present them collectively as a “story-book” or “novel-in-stories” (as was done so effectively with the UK publication of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011)). This did seem to be an attractive proposition to identify what the fiction collectively represented, as the stories were designed to be interconnected by the specific and non-specific technical processes of undertaking genetic science. However, it was decided not to overstretch that connectivity and so, the collection is presented as distinct pieces linked through elements of ideas, content and structure.

The stories stand as a collection of contemporary tales examining how the practice of empirical genetic science will have far-reaching implications in ways that can be both related to in present-day situations (and through real-life events) and imagined in the very near future. The collection encompasses a range of stories that begins with “The Commuter Lab” offering the basic tenets of undertaking genetic science and builds on this knowledge and understanding within each piece of the collection as it progresses. The final story, *A Common Thread*, is able to be freer of some of the mechanical detail of undertaking the processes of genetic science—precisely because of its interconnectivity—so is able to ask searching questions on the ethics and the morality concerning the present and very near future uses of the science, while treading lightly on the fringe of magical realism in the way that Atwood and Margaret Drabble manage so effectively.

### **Creative writing practice collection Development**

During the initial stages of developing a suitable research methodology for the main study, a collection of science-inspired fiction outlines and ideas were identified, based on factual, contemporary science and scientists. These ideas were initially developed from a range of sources: scientists; academics; scientific peer-reviewed papers; science journal articles; newspaper articles; published fiction stories; conversations with those involved in mediating science and its communication; museum visits and exhibitions, and inspired from a creative but informed position with a concentration on the “representation” of science. One thing was apparent: the continued and increasing influence science (especially genetic science) has and will have, on modern society.

For each storyline chosen to be developed further as part of the practice-led research study, four distinct approaches were undertaken to help with establishing a methodological approach: a detailed focus on the representation of scientific and technological elements of the initial storyline; a critical consideration looking at the current reality and plausibility of the science and technology involved in the fictional constructs; the factual nature, or realism, of the science processes undertaken within the fictions, and finally, the factual nature (realism) of the final outcome of the science represented within the fictions. As these storylines were developed, there was a process of validating and re-validating the “hard” science involved, with

reference to scientific papers and research, and the introduction of new potential (speculative) ideas of genetic science and technology, to open up the storylines to what Markus Schmidt et al (2013) refers to as a “Sense of Possibilities” [7] (10), and Susan M. Gaines et al (2013) as “novels of ideas” [8] (7).

The creative writing collection of genetic science-inspired fiction consists of three extended or longer pieces of creative writing (two novelettes and one novella), that share the common general narrative theme of empirical science and more specifically, that of genetic science. In their collective form, the pieces total roughly the length of a small-sized fiction novel. Both the current (and continuing post-doc) practice-led research focusses (and will focus) on presenting pieces of science-as-fiction that highlight a range of potential effects and consequences for a society, as it starts to embark on human-based, empirical genetic and synthetic biological scientific research [9]. One aim of this creative practice is to help forefront and assist in bringing these scientific, ethical and moral perspectives, issues and discussions into a popular, public sphere for debate.

As a key element of the research methodology employed, it was planned that one of the initial pieces of genetic science-inspired fiction would serve as one half of a comparative creative-critical study [10]. The aim of this informative approach was to identify any distinguishing factors which were common, across two samples of science-inspired fiction. This technique was based on a detailed critical (and close) examination, that was carried out on Andrea Barrett’s (1996) *Ship Fever* collection of science-inspired fiction stories, during the early preparation stages for the research study. This critique was re-worked and condensed, to provide a framework where direct comparisons of key areas between science-inspired fictions of similar form, could be undertaken.

This initial framework design proved useful in identifying a representative sample of genetic science-inspired fiction, which in turn provided samples of both published and e-published works, as potential comparative texts to the proposed original, practice-led writing as research. Subsequently, findings from these comparisons were able to be fed back into the creative writing, to strengthen the study.

The sample of genetic-inspired fiction, ranged across novels and both longer and shorter stories, and included: *Generosity* by Richard Powers (2011),

*Intuition by Allegra Goodman (2009), Bio Punk: Stories from the far side of research* edited by Ra Page (Comma Press[11], 2012), and e-published works on Jennifer Rohn's webzine *Lablit.com*[12], including *An investigation into love by Babcock and Wainwright* by Pippa Goldschmidt (2015).

## Creative writing as research

As an initial starting point, the examples of creative writing as research are about exploration of ideas inspired by genetic science, and the drama-based fiction which comes from that exploration, as an attempt, through the creative practice to explore the notion that there can be an equal appreciation and mistrust, in how credible scientific knowledge is understood.

## Process, contexts and influences

This considers how a range of material from (principally) genetic science influenced and informed the research-led creative writing practice, from the initial sparks of ideas to developing characters, to creating realistic environments for the stories to unfold, and again, as part of the re-drafting process, all with an aim of producing credible, genetic science-inspired creative writing.

The following contains outlines of the three creative writing pieces (A-C) submitted as the principal focus of the practice-led writing as research study, along with samples of "hard" and "popular" science (genetic science) evidenced as indicators of this practice-led research approach. An excerpt from each story follows these outlines.

The main characters which feature in the practice-led pieces are not fictional scientists in the classic research mode as suggested by Rosslyn D. Haynes (2014) but instead are science professionals, medical specialists or similar "outsider" amateurs. This approach has purposely been chosen to try and address issues of exposition which can often be clumsily-handled in science-inspired fiction. The main characters in each of the three submitted fictions were chosen and positioned in such a way that part of their function was to learn about a particular aspect of genetic-inspired science, or its application as a genetic, bio-technology or bio-engineering problem.

The ideas, which were the initial inspirations for the three practice-led writing as research pieces submitted, are each based on factual elements, from

both the perspective of genetic science and also the cultural, story component. Starting from this narrative base, an aim has been to bring a certain realistic credibility to the practice-led writing as research.

Within the creative pieces, an effort was made to situate both the science of and processes of genetics, as plausible, within a contemporary setting. It is hoped that this has partly been achieved through using a factual basis for the initial story research highlighted above. To consolidate this notion of plausibility, each of the practice-led pieces have also had the benefit of revisions and additions, to enhance scientific credibility, as the fictions have developed and improved through re-visiting and re-working, where necessary, the "hard" science elements.

In terms of referring to these creative pieces as practice-led writing as research, there is confidence that the practice has informed how a factually-inspired genetic science-as-fiction is developed and written, with these findings then being fed back into the drafting process, to be re-written and developed, in both scientific and narrative terms.

The resulting aim with this approach to the creative and critically facing work is to consider the basis for exploring the development of fiction as practice-led research through the writing of genetic science-inspired speculative fiction.

The practice-led creative writing research outlined below, along with a specific example of each of their hard science and popular science/cultural inspirations, provides an initial insight into both the processes of undertaking genetic science as an empirical activity, and also helps to illustrate some of the ethical and moral consequences of exploiting and exploring this area of scientific endeavour, through fiction.

**A. "The Commuter Lab":** "An under-employed science graduate finds himself caught up in an illegal, real-world genetic experiment, trapped between a covert governmental organization and a fringe group of genome hackers."

"Hard": The initial idea for this story came from an article in the *New Scientist* entitled, "Rise of the garage genome hackers", (McKenna 2009), which looks into an "underworld" of amateur synthetic biologists and engineers, as they "tweak" microbial DNA, and specifically talks about "bio-weather" and

its role in “DNA-fingerprinting”. Further areas of “hard” science were added as the drafting process began, and the narrative required more scientific structure and components, for example, the whole real-world concept of a “Lab on a chip”, which controls small-scale DNA analysis of microfluidic samples, was identified from an online article by Dolomite Microfluids (2008) entitled “Microfluids to revolutionise DNA analysis.” This article provided part of the basis for the hackers to be able to analyse the stolen “bio-weather” sample.

“Popular”: Amongst the fads to emerge, in genetic science and engineering, is the sampling of genetic data known as bio-weather—unwittingly discarded skin cells, hair, mucus or other organic matter—referred to as “bio-trail” for the research story, and the microbes within this detritus. With respect to highlighting real-world techniques involved in the story, notably the replication of a DNA sample in order for it to be successfully analysed, Ben Goldacre in his attempt to deconstruct the “myth” of science with his book, *Bad Science* (2008), explains the use of the PCR[13] technique (the same techniques as used by the hackers in the story), to replicate a genetic sample as he investigates the controversy over the poor genetic science involved, in creating the media-fuelled, world-wide MMR scare in 2002 (304).

### “The Commuter Lab” ©2018

(Fitzgerald 2018b. Section of story from pp.36-8.)  
“Context description: Following an unexpected altercation, one of the two main characters, Peter, enlists the help of an amateur/outsider scientist (TT). Peter hopes his long-time friend can analyse the contents of the mysterious box he suspects contains evidence of an illegal covert science field-experiment.”

“Beep. Beep. Beep.” A soft alarm sounded in the Garage lab. Peter woke with a start. He slowly focused on TT who was bent over a laptop near the microarray unit.

“What’s going on?” Peter asked, barely awake.

“It’s okay mate you just nodded off for a few minutes. Not surprising really.”

“What’s that noise?” Peter sat up. He stretched his arms above his head and yawned. “Oh. I feel awful.” He looked at the clock. “It’s nearly midnight.”

“So it is. That’s just a notification alarm from the microarray. The analyses are complete. I’m browsing the results now. Interesting.” TT seemed distracted. “Come and

have a look.”

“No. Not that. The hissing noise? And what’s that smell?” Peter wrinkled his nose and coughed. “It’s like burnt pine needles?”

TT looked at his friend and then at the microarray. He sniffed the air. “Oh that. That’s just the waste processing gases being vented along with any unused test material from the analyser. All sterile by now of course thanks to a process called “extreme heat conditioning”. According to the manual anyway. I wouldn’t worry about it. Have a look at this.”

Peter gathered himself and joined TT who was clearly engrossed in the analytical results.

“What is it? Have you found something?”

“Loads of interesting stuff. Look.” TT moved away from the screen to let Peter have a clearer view. “On the left there you’ve got a standard analysis of a control sample from the City of London courtesy of QM. It shows what you would expect with fungi types such as *Trichoderma*, *Chaetomium*, *Nigrospora*, and bacteria groups such as *Streptococcus*, the *Bacillus* family, *Dermabacter* etc. Some are harmless but some of them can be deadly in the right strains, conditions and concentrations.”

“I do remember some of this stuff, you know,” Peter responded.

“Sorry.” TT smiled. “I was just trying to set the scene as it were. Okay?”

Peter nodded. He turned his attention back to the screen.

“The right-hand section should be listing the identified findings found *only* in the micro-vacuum sample after the control matches have been removed,” TT stated.

The area appeared blank. “If your databases are so comprehensive where are the matching results?”

TT didn’t offer any reply. He seemed to be deep in thought.

“That’s got to be pretty unusual. Wouldn’t you say?”

Again, nothing from his friend.

“According to that analysis, Randall or whoever it was didn’t collect anything out of the ordinary. So why all the fuss? Why the fracas with me? Why were the Met so keen to talk with both of us if all I snatched was a container full of traffic pollution? And you weren’t even there?” Peter let frustration and questions tumble out of him.

He rubbed his eyes just in case he had missed something. Nothing had changed. This made even less sense than before the tests. He



was intrigued by TT's continued silence. What can't I see, he wondered.

"So, what do *you* think is in it?" Peter asked. He knew from TT's reaction that there was more to this than a blank screen.

"The Network has access to very specialist biological and genetic databases. If we need to we can request help with an identification," TT said. He seemed to evade the direct questioning. "It's usually quite slow. However, I think we should use any possible sources of help we can get."

"What's this 'Network?' You've never mentioned them before?" Peter asked.

"You've never..." TT started.

"Needed to know before. Yes, I get it."

"Their official name is the Interactive Genetic Coding Database and Synthetic Biological Network, or IGCDSBN for short."

"I can see why it's referred to as the Network," Peter said. He moved back from the screen.

TT logged in to the IGCDSBN database. He opened an email and attached a data file containing the analytical results. TT sent this off anonymously to the Network's administrators.

"For now, that's all we can do in terms of possible identification. Let's see what the actual decoding can tell us." He minimised the Network window and opened up the test sample file.

Peter looked on and kept quiet. He knew how TT worked in the lab. It was best to observe and participate only when invited.

"Right. What have we got?" TT scanned the list of data for any clues. "So, what makes some of you so special that my own databases haven't been able to pick you out?" TT addressed the decoded micro-organisms.

"Here we are," TT said. "This profile is a bit more interesting. Survival across an extremely wide temperature range. Unusual for a fungus. Genome made up of eight chromosomes and over ten thousand genes. Fairly complex for such a small critter aren't you. Quite similar in make-up to an *Aspergillus*-type fungal spore. I wonder what your party trick is?" TT looked up. He turned to Peter. "Any ideas on this?"

Peter tried to focus his own thoughts. "Why would Randall be collecting this particular microbe? If he was willing to fight with a stranger to keep it, it must be worth something to him. Why is he trying to keep it under wraps?"

An email alert sounded. TT's focus was drawn to a multi-coloured flashing envelope icon at the bottom right of the screen.

"That's highly unusual. The Network has sent an immediate reply."

"That's good isn't it?"

"It's unnervingly quick. I've known it take weeks to get a reply from them before." TT sounded concerned.

"Open it and let's find out what we've got. If it's a new species we can name it. How about *Aspergillus Peterus*?"

"Somehow I don't think you'd want this type of fungal mould named after you. It could well turn out to be the cause of the next major bronchial epidemic."

"Oh," Peter replied. "Perhaps not, then."

TT hesitated just for a moment. He opened the email.

**B. "The Patient Experiment":** "A disillusioned junior doctor tries to escape an emotionally-driven episode which has blighted his fledgling career, as he seeks solace and purpose as a psychology researcher in a medical care centre, only to discover that perhaps some mistakes are destined to be repeated."

The initial idea for this creative practice came jointly from the work carried out at the University of Bath's Centre for Death and Society (University of Bath, 2005) and at the Centre for Death and Life Studies at Durham University (2008). Although both of these centres focus more on the humanities side, there are elements of empirical investigation used within the multi-discipline approach to their areas of study.

"Hard": "Experimental animal speaks" is quite an apt description for this story. Essentially, the "patient" can survive persistent clinical deaths. On closer investigation into whether the empirically based (medical and genetic) science aspects needed for this story to work were present, a whole range of material that could support a plausible story was uncovered. One of the main pieces came from an article by Benjamin F. Trump et al in, *Toxicologic Pathology*, (1997: 82-88) which provides evidence-based material on cell-death and injury, and how, given the right circumstances, it could be initially reversible.

"Popular": In the mainstream press and periodicals there has always been a fascination with near-death but occasionally articles do carry some elements of scientific weight and these were the ones that were followed for leads, ideas and further sources

of information. For this story, one such piece was a science-labelled 2010 article by Jonathan Leake, in *The Sunday Times*, “That’s not the afterlife – it’s a brainstorm”. This was particularly useful for the further development of “The Patient Experiment” as practice-led research, as it deals with oxygen-level driven electrical brain impulses at the point of near-death.

### “The Patient Experiment” ©2018

(Fitzgerald 2018c. Section of story from pp.73-5.)

Context description: “One of the two main characters in the story, Jake, a medical researcher/doctor, contemplates his future in a new post. He suspects he may become embroiled in the unethical treatment of a long-term patient (known as TP). A friendly colleague, Jayne provides him with some much-needed background information.”

Jake sat in his office. It was three days since he had been in theatre. After a further restless night of dreams and waiting for a call in the early hours which never came, he felt exhausted. Slumped in the leather chair Jake mulled over TP’s more recent case history. He didn’t know what he was looking for. He was sure if there was anything incriminating or valuable it had been carefully removed.

He had returned to work the day after witnessing TP’s resuscitation process first-hand and checked with Jayne on his patient’s state of recovery. She assured him there was nothing to be unduly concerned about. This raised his suspicions and only made him more anxious.

A light tapping sounded on his door.

“Come in. It’s open.” Jake turned to face the doorway.

Jayne stepped into his office. “I hope I’m not disturbing you?”

“Hello, Jayne. No, you’re not disturbing anything.”

“You won’t uncover anything in those that they don’t want you to find,” Jayne pointed to the files in his lap.

“Thanks, Jayne. I’d already figured that one out after Sister let something slip in theatre”

“What did she say?”

“Something about TP suffering some short-term memory impairment”. For that I’d probably read minor brain injury or cell damage. I can’t find anything in TP’s medical notes to match it with.”

The young nurse’s face turned paler. She looked away.

“What is it? Here. Have my seat.” Jake

stood up and ushered Jayne into the chair. She sat down.

“It’s partly why I came to see you.”

“Why? What’s happened? Is it TP?” Jake felt his stomach drop.

“TP is out of the resuscitation chamber. He is in post-resus recovery but there were a few complications.”

“Such as?”

“He’s not made as full a recovery as was expected.”

“Is this to do with what O’Rourke let slip? The failure of the antioxidants to suppress the oxygen free radicals?”

Jayne looked at him blankly. “I’m sorry Jake, I don’t know anything about that. All I have been told is that TP sustained some cell damage within his brain cortex during the resuscitation process. I’m sorry. That’s all I know. I thought you’d like to know too.”

“What? When? Whilst I was there?” He asked in a flurry.

“Apparently the damage only came to light once the resus process had run its course. By then it was too late to try and reverse it,” she said. “I’m so sorry, Jake.”

“Can I see him?”

“He’s in the Isolation unit. Sister’s only allowing post-resus medical personnel in for the time being.”

“Oh.”

“And in case you’re thinking of visiting on the quiet there are two rather large orderlies guarding his door. It wouldn’t be wise without Sister’s permission,” Jayne advised.

An awkward silence settled over the office. Jake moved to the corner. The realisation of TP’s condition started to sink in.

Jayne shuffled in her seat. She looked as though she was deciding whether to add something further. “There was another not wholly unconnected reason for coming to see you.” Jake looked over at her. “There’s more?”

Jayne sat forward. “Has anyone mentioned the name of another clinic to you? The Harvey Clinic? It’s the Centre’s partner establishment in Chelsea. Just off the Kings’ Road?”

“Can’t say they have. What’s it got to do with TP’s situation?”

“Directly, nothing. Indirectly, everything. It’s connected to what happened to TP in resus.”

“I’m not in the mood for cryptic clues Jayne. In plain English please. What are you trying to tell me?”

“Okay. This is just for TP because I like the old guy.” She composed herself. “The Harvey Clinic treats the well-heeled for depression, drug abuse, psychological problems, materialistic addiction. You know the sort of thing?”

Jake nodded.

**C. *A Common Thread*:** “A seasoned anthropological researcher is seconded to a micro-biological project in unusual circumstances, where she finds that her analytical skills are not the only thing the experimental project requires of her.”

The initial idea for this story came from an editorial news article in the Science and Society section of the *New Scientist* entitled “Discovering the tomb of Jesus, wife and son” (2007: 7). The article speculates that any possible descendants from Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene could be traced through Magdalene’s mitochondrial DNA. This started a thought process along the lines of an amateur scientist/bio-hacker who plunders grave sites of famous and key-historical figures in order to steal genetic material, in an attempt to sequence it and catalogue the genome.

“Hard”: With this piece of creative writing, there are elements of “hard” science prevalent in *A Common Thread*, most notable in the extraction of DNA and the processes involved. In addition, there are more specific areas, including the work currently being undertaken at the Virtual Physiological Human Institute for Integrative Biomedical Research (VPHI 2011) which is an EU-sponsored research institute whose main aim is to construct real-time medically-accurate, software simulated, virtual human models.

“Popular”: As well as commenting and speculating (from a “popular” science perspective) on the many uses for genetic science, with an increasing focus on synthetic biology, journals such as the *New Scientist* offer useful and informed introductions to a whole range of scientific subjects. Two example articles which have been consulted during the on-going development of this practice-led research are: Philip Cohen’s (2006) “Introduction: Genetics” and Michael La Page’s (2011) “Read me a genome”. A further example of utilising popular genetic science to inform practice-led writing as research comes from an article by Tim Rayment in *The Sunday Times*, “Do keep up, doctor, this is changing medicine for ever” (2011). This article considers how much more of medicine will be genetics-based, and increasingly will be part of a synthetic biological revolution.

### ***A Common Thread* ©2018**

(Fitzgerald 2018d. Section of story from pp.101-7.)  
Context description: An anthropology researcher (Judith) has been seconded without much choice into a molecular genetics professor’s current research project. Judith is a bit bemused by the whole idea but needs the work, whilst her own supervisor is on extended leave. Information is slowly revealed to her about the project, aspects of which she finds worrying. In this part of the story, the Professor (Charles) discusses some of the background to the project.

I parked my bike outside the entrance to Psych-Anth. A couple of minutes to spare, that’s good. No competition for the undercover areas today. The campus was near empty save for a few maintenance vans. Even so I made sure my bike was locked. A habit borne out of experience. I walked around the perimeter of the low-rise Science Faculty building. All the connecting passageways and corridors had been closed up for the break.

Just on ten o’clock I came up to the entrance of Molecular Biology as instructed. The Pilgrim Bell sounded far off in the distance of the city. As the last chime struck one of two side doors marked Emergency Exit opened. The professor beckoned me in. Yesterday’s feeling of unease returned briefly.

I entered into the bottom floor of a stairwell. Once inside the professor closed the door firmly behind me. It was a fairly gloomy space. Unpainted concrete walls and emergency lighting. Classy.

“Glad you could make it. Thank you for being on time Ms Catchpole. Can I call you Judith?”

“Judith is fine, prof.” Familiarity cuts both ways professor, testing him.

“Me prof, you Judith.”

I smiled at his riposte. “Looks like we’ve both discovered a sense of humour.”

He returned my smile.

“Where are we working then?” I asked. “Have you got any fresh milk?”

“First floor, second door on the left. Fresh milk and coffee, or tea if you prefer.” He pointed up the stairs. “You lead the way. I just have to finish securing the door.”

As I climbed the stairs I glanced back. The professor seemed to be reconnecting security wires to the pressure pads at the top and either side of the double doors. My disquiet lingered. I moved on as directed with the professor now

close behind.

We entered a large laboratory teaching space. On one side the wall was mostly plate glass. The opposite was magnolia fibreboard. This had been papered with undergrad instructional posters. These mostly showed graphics of cells containing unravelling strands of double helices complete with sections magnified to reveal the complexities of genetic information. Apart from the odd tray of lab dishes and various *Pyrex* glassware, the over-riding theme of this teaching lab was probably the one thing most in common with all the other labs in the Science Faculty. The dominance of desktops, flat-screens and the occasional printer.

“Go on through to the back. There’s a separate office area.”

I hadn’t picked out the office at the rear of the lab. The unfurled blinds were beige and mixed in so well with the lab’s walls. I opened the door to the office and was immediately greeted by the set-up from Christmas Eve. This time in a slightly larger space. The professor squeezed around me as I stood in the doorway.

“Like a home from home,” he stated.

“For you, maybe.”

“We’ll see ...”

After a brief silence the professor swept his hand before him. “Come in. Make yourself ... at home.”

“Thanks.” I was glad to be able to take off an outer fleece layer. The bike ride wasn’t that bad from home to the Uni now the cycle routes had been completed. But you always felt so much hotter than it actually was.

“Good. Take a seat,” the professor pointed to a small settee in the corner of the room.

There was a square table and a chair there too. A laptop, the professor’s I presumed sat half-open on the table. I guessed this was a break area for him.

“Coffee? Tea?”

“Tea would be great. Dash of milk. No sugar. Thanks.”

“Right. I’ll be back in a minute. Have a look around if you like?” He disappeared out of the lab.

I didn’t take up the offer. I stayed put as it was warm and fairly comfortable. And I was still yet to fully disentangle myself from the army surplus shoulder bag which seemed to contain my life these days. True to his word the professor returned with a couple of mugs and a packet of Garibaldis. He placed these down in

front of me.

“Thanks,” I offered. “Garibaldis...haven’t seen those in years.” I opened the packet and snapped one off. There was no standing on ceremony when biscuits were involved.

The professor smiled and took one himself. He sat down in the chair opposite and took a sip of his acrid-smelling coffee. He leaned forward. “I suspect you are wondering why I requested you in today. On a bank holiday.”

“Just a bit,” I replied. “To be honest I’m only here out of curiosity.”

“That’s okay...” the professor hesitated but didn’t add anything further.

“I figured on the way over here, that it was unlikely that the FSS would let you remove equipment containing classified and personal information from a secure government building.” There was no noticeable reaction from the professor. I let this settle for a few seconds. “So. One of two things has happened. Either we have just committed a grand theft of government intellectual and physical property. Or the research project you outlined on Christmas Eve has stayed exactly where it was and what you’re working on is something related but different” I felt pleased with myself and took a long drink.

The professor stared at me for a short while. “Not bad. Eustace was right to recommend you. There is some truth in both your accounts.”

“There is?” I felt sick. What have I become mixed up in?

“Don’t worry. The first one not so much. The Home Office won’t be trying to track you down. The second one though is fairly spot on.”

“Explain please” I managed.

“With the FSS official project. The one I told you about,” he said. “All the data I had been working with was put into secure storage as soon as the preliminary and restricted notice of closure came through. That was two weeks before the Christmas break. What we ‘borrowed’ the other day was the bare bones software and hardware. Understandably this is quite a sensitive area for the Home Office. They kept a very close eye on me with regards to their data.” The professor’s voice had a deliberate and measured tone about it.

It sounded like he had rehearsed this short talk more than once. “Perhaps they had good reason,” I retorted. I hoped there was a look of displeasure on my face.

The professor seemed unfazed. “With no official data to work with for the last couple of weeks, I decided to introduce some of the material I had been collecting for just such an eventuality. I didn’t think it would present itself so soon.”

“What sort of ‘material’?”

The professor looked at me plainly. “DNA of course. What else would I be collecting?”

Silly me. “Specifically, whose genetic material have you been collecting?”

“We’ll get on to that presently. If you bear with me I can show you.”

If this was meant to placate me it had the opposite effect. Calm down Judy. Calm down. Let the man speak. A few seconds ticked by and my blood pressure dropped. “Sorry, Professor. Carry on.”

“Thank you,” he said. “The unexpected closure was a shame as I was starting to get some interesting results with the FSS project. However, for my personal research it presented a real opportunity. With the DNA material the Home Office supplied, I was able to refine a couple of the analytical techniques to a point where I started to generate measurable data. As a result, my own work starts from a much higher place on the development curve.”

“Going back to my earlier point. Do you, or *we* I suppose now have official permission to use this equipment?” I gestured at the array of quietly humming boxes sitting on the lab bench.

“Yes. Although...”

“A straight answer would be appreciated.”

The professor looked at me. He appeared to hesitate. “Yes. We do.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“But maybe not exactly from the right people,” he added.

“What does that mean?” I could feel my frustration boiling up again.

“The person in charge of research at the Southwark HQ sanctioned the equipment’s use for my personal research, after the workload for the FSS had been completed. He agreed that it could be used off-site for a specified time as long as all the government data remained securely with them.”

“That all seems reasonable. So why all the apparent cloak and dagger stuff?”

“Two days later that same head of research was dismissed and paid off. Left the building that day. Escorted out apparently. I wasn’t even there to pass on my best wishes. There’s to be

no replacement. Effectively all the research programmes have been kicked into some very long grass.”

“That government-sponsored lawn must be more like a savannah these days,” I said.

The prof nodded.

“So, where does that leave the issue of the equipment? Which you now conveniently have off-site?”

“As far as I’m concerned I have an authorised and signed order. This entitles me to pick up the equipment for use in my research.”

“For how long?”

“I’d like to think indefinitely. However, I suppose we’ll have to work on the premise that come the fourth of January they may expect it back. With all their research programmes cancelled including my own, there will be no more work on the project in Southwark. So technically we’ve got it at least until they ask for it back,” the professor replied. “Being realistic we should work on the fourth as being our last certain day of research,” he added.

“Why then?”

“That’s when they are all due to return from their Christmas break, if anyone is left after the cuts.”

“Okay.” I weighed up the professor’s comments. “So, who knows that you have it?”

“The *ex-head* of research and the security guard. I suppose it will be documented on a slip of paper somewhere.”

I felt relieved that we hadn’t technically stolen anything. “Not as straightforward as I would have liked but I can live with it.”

What I didn’t impart to the professor was a two-year probation order in my distant past. I could do without any trouble re-visiting me from a desperate and violent time I’d rather forget. The prof didn’t need to know any details as long as he was being straight with me. I suppose I didn’t have much choice now. I just had to take his word and place my trust in him.

## Concluding remarks

An ambition of this research study is that through following a “practice of writing” methodological approach, the outcomes offer a contribution to knowledge and understanding in the growing areas of Practice-as-Research and Practice-Led Research within creative arts that also transects science communication and the medical humanities. The scope of the project in the area of science

communication contributes to a general knowledge of scientific process and the undertaking of science and genetic science, examined through creating contemporary fiction. The purpose of highlighting some of the involved practices of genetic science to audiences who may or may not be familiar with broad concepts and consequences, is an attempt to engage individuals with glimpses of detail to help prompt further involvement with the processes of scientific investigation.

This scholarship offers at its core one method of engaging audiences—readership—with a content and a style that is designed to be different from what they might normally experience. To accommodate this, efforts have been made to keep the substance of science and genetic science within recognisable boundaries, in line with those of a detailed news report or popular magazine article. When attempts are made to engage readers with ideas and concepts they may find unfamiliar, these elements are incorporated within a general knowledge of genetics and science. This practice-led approach requires readers to be comfortable with both the story content and style, as everyday pieces of fiction writing. It is hoped these collected stories will be enjoyed without (some of) the pre-conceptions of how the workings and processes of science are often presented within popular media.

In the practice-led study, science-inspired writing explores and situates the processes of science and genetic science through contemporary fiction, in an informed mix of the possible and the probable. It is through this dual-approach (as evidenced in the resulting critical contextual study) that the strength of the ideas, subject-research and applied practice all combine to produce a collection of work that offers a distinctive methodology in the use of science-based characters and scientific material, in creating a selection of contemporary speculative fiction.

With this study, the research investigation has been centred on the extent to which it is possible to create a genetic science-inspired contemporary fiction that delivers the science, the processes of science and a glimpse of the scientific environment within the story, in an accessible and engaging method. This interrogation of science and genetic science within creative (writing) practice proposes a “What if?” question that enquires along the lines of, “What would happen if this piece of research was introduced into clinical medicine?” or “What

if the resulting treatment derived from that genetic breakthrough was introduced into a section of the population?” The initial proposition afforded by using a speculative approach was intended to create resultant fictional stories that operate within a factually based frame. This has enabled the presentation of the scientific elements and processes of the stories—as well as their nature—to be designed with the emphasis placed on authenticity and speculation, rather than fantasy. The practice collection and the critical context rationale together help determine the success in using the ethos of a scientific endeavour as the basis to inspire a plausible and authentic fiction.

Through employing a practice-led approach, relevant issues of form and genre in creative practice have been addressed. There was always a balance to be reached between what to say *with* the fiction (critical reception) and what to say *in* the fiction (creative reception). The choices made both in the communication of scientific material and the design of the characters and their stories, enabled the creation of a critically facing collection of science-as-fiction set in contemporary society within a speculative framework, all bound together by genetic science. The practice collection sits solidly in a speculative fiction category that occupies a middle ground between the broad groupings of literary and genre fiction and slips, on occasion, into social science fiction.

Practice-based research is often a keen topic of educational debate. At the beginning of the research study process, there were tentative concerns at the prospect of creative (writing) practice-led scholarship being considered as the type of research that would generate new knowledge. From the perspective of having now completed that practice—alongside the associated contextual work—it is appreciated that research is rooted as much in the process as on the focused outcome. In terms of referring to practice-based writing as “knowledge” and “research”, there is a confidence that the practice—and contextual—work critically informs how a factually inspired genetic science-as-fiction is developed, designed and written.

## Notes

1. Tuttle in *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* (2005) offers a useful quantitative guide for a range of fiction forms. These have been used as a benchmark for the purposes of this study. Tuttle offers a quantitative definition of "...the novelette [as] from 7,500 to 17,500 words; and the novella from 17,500 to 40,000 words" (115).
2. For a detailed consideration of this news story and its chronology see *The Guardian* article, "Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach" by Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison (2018). In collaboration with *The Observer* and *Channel 4*, this piece broke the story on the deceitful collection and abuse of privileged profile data by Facebook and Cambridge Analytica primarily during the 2017 US Presidential election. Available at: [https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election?CMP=share_btn_link) [24 March 2018].
3. Discussion of how both the "sociology of science" and the "philosophy of science" influence a communication approach in the creative writing of science, is discussed at length in the body of the research study.
4. For the purposes of this study, "hard" science is regarded as scientific study based either on solid scientific theory or empirical evidence.
5. "Object" taken as one of the main characters, to whom the science/genetic engineering is (physically) happening to.
6. "Subject" taken as what is being sought in respect to the story's scientific/genetic aspects and/or the storyline itself.
7. In this paper, Schmidt et al. use the term "sense of possibilities" to describe both narrative fictions about "real" or realistic science, as well as fictional science elements, within wider narrative fiction.
8. Gaines et al., describe these as works which contain scientific elements along with other aspects from a wide range of styles and genres including romances, mysteries, philosophical or thrillers, and crucially, with authors familiar with and/or educated in the humanities/arts and sciences.
9. A recent paper in the *Public Understanding of Science* journal on this debate (Schmidt et al., 2013), refers to a similar approach to contemporary creative work, as "Diegetic Prototyping" (1), which uses technologies and science currently on the "drawing board", as potential avenues of inspiration for creative fiction pieces.
10. Boulter (2007: 2), suggests that a creative writer's work benefits from that writer being able to critically appraise their own work and feed this back into their creative process.
11. Comma Press have published three collections of short stories: *When It Changed* (2009), *Litmus* (2011) and *Bio Punk* (2012), which tackle the main subjects of: science into fiction, modern science and the far side of genetics/genetic science research, respectively. The approach of the editors (Geoff Ryman and Ra Page) is a unique one, as each fiction author is paired with a scientist, who provides a short "Afterword" commentary on the context of the science issues raised in the short fiction pieces. The approach employed in the collected practice-led writing as research, is to try to combine both elements, so the fiction contains scientific "explanations" without any overt didacticism.
12. Rohn's webzine, *Lablit.com: the culture of science in fiction and fact*, is an invaluable resource, which brings together the worlds of "Hard Science", "Popular Science" and "Science as Fiction" and offers a platform for aspiring writers of "science as fiction" to be e-published.
13. PCR: Polymerase chain reaction, which is carried out by a PCR Machine or Thermocycler.

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# Summoning Ghosts and Releasing Angels

Challenging the Tyranny of the Blank Page

Amina Alyal and Oz Hardwick

## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, the authors challenge the notion of “the blank page” and, with reference to visual phenomena such as Charles Bonnet Syndrome and pareidolia, suggest ways in which the page can be reconceptualised as a space in which the text already exists, along with ways in which they may be accessed by the writer.

## Introduction

“How,” asks Julia Bell at the beginning of her and Paul Magrs’ excellent *Creative Writing Coursebook*, “do you pass through that first, often terrifying, encounter with the blank page?” (2001: 3). It’s a question that lies at the root of a whole industry of Creative Writing guides, of classes and courses, of more or less formal groups and networks, and of fidgety self-doubt as we attempt to stare down notebooks or laptops. Writing, it seems, is an activity which a great many wish to undertake, but which many find “terrifying” – a description that will only appear hyperbolic to those who have never bared themselves to the self-revealing page. Every “how to” book on the subject will offer prompts and exercises to overcome the challenge of the blank page and, indeed, there are whole books which are focused entirely upon strategies for breaking through the psychological barriers we may meet in this complexly adversarial encounter.

As Jack Heffron’s reassuringly-titled – and refreshingly upbeat – *The Writer’s Idea Book* notes, though, the difficulty isn’t generally the oft-perceived problem of not having ideas. “Most writers,” says Heffron, “have more ideas than they can explore in a lifetime” (2000: 2), yet still the would-be writer may so often find the looming spectre of the blank page overwhelmingly daunting. While the books already mentioned, along with countless others in the field (see, for example, Doubtfire, 2003: 5; Luckhurst and Singleton, 2000: 10; Mills, 2006: 35-6) aim to jolt their readers into overcoming this obstacle, we both – as writers, teachers and workshop leaders – seek instead to encourage the writers we work with to reconceptualise the idea of the blank page itself. In doing this, we approach the act of writing within a framework that is informed by visual phenomena: namely Charles Bonnet Syndrome and pareidolia. While the introduction of such weighty terms into the Creative Writing classroom may simply scare the faint-hearted even more than an empty page, and send them scuttling straight into writing, we employ the theory with a decidedly soft touch. In what follows, we shall describe our approaches, offering illustrative examples of the results from our own work, and suggest how they may be used in the Creative Writing classroom.

### Summoning Ghosts – Amina Alyal

The blank page is itself the site of expectation

and interpretation, always already haunted by the “Thought-Fox” (Hughes, 1957: 15) of both writer and reader. Even a printed page, made up as it is of words and blank spaces around them, is populated by spectres which find their genesis in the acts of reading and of interpretation, in other texts, in generic expectation, and even, ultimately, in the reader’s memories and associations. In considering the complex ways in which this process operates, a number of theories are apposite, most prominently perhaps reader-response theory, in the inception of which Wolfgang Iser declared that, “The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence ...” (1972: 279). He discusses the tension between explicit and implicit content of the text in the process of reading (ibid: 282), and how “the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations,” as is demonstrated by how “a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first” (ibid: 285). In all this, we need to

bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself.

These gaps have a different effect on the process of anticipation and retrospection, and thus on the “gestalt” of the virtual dimension, for they may be filled in different ways. For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. In this very act the dynamics of reading are revealed. (Iser, 1972: 285)

The “virtual dimension of the text,” as Iser suggests (ibid: 283), may be different for different readers. The phenomenological theories of Descartes and Husserl cast further light on the process, in terms of the ways in which sense perceptions are processed by a subjective cognitive activity: whilst these theories originate in sense perceptions of the empirical world generally, we can apply the concept to how words and spaces, perceived on the page, take on subjective formulations within the observing mind. Indeed, even emphatically neurological conditions such as Charles Bonnet Syndrome can shed light on this experience. Some texts more than others focus on the process of the mind making sense of what it

sees, what Barthes called “scriptible” or “writerly” texts: “the goal of literary work (of literature at work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes, 1975: 4). These texts can be examined (and written) in the course of a productive exploration of hermeneutics.

Taking such hermeneutics as a starting point stimulates writing. I am working on a collection of poems with the broad theme of *ghosts*. In doing so, I am partly exploring the ways in which we read and the effects of form on the reading experience. Thus, as well as reading widely on ghosts and their histories, I am exploring the ways in which missing or fragmented texts generate meaning, this meaning being drawn partly from nuance and partly from generic expectation. The ghost, that persistent phenomenon, has been framed in ways that enlighten my writing process, including as metaphors, memories, recorded apparitions, sense impressions, states of mind, theories and concepts. Particularly fruitful, in this connection, is Iser’s assertion that

with a literary text we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination. (Iser 1972: 288)

“Gaps” are an integral part of Charles Bonnet Syndrome, one of the explanations of ghostly sightings and a condition in which failing eyesight causes the visual cortex to make up the shortfall by providing mental images that are understood in the same way as retinal images received from outside: research suggests “this phenomenon is akin to phantom limb syndrome” (Nair, Shah and Anilkumar 2015: 206), so that “spontaneous neuronal discharge result[s] in visual hallucinations” (Stojanov, 2016: 883). This idea of how the mind can coherently “fill in the gaps” leads in turn to related philosophical considerations. Descartes’s ruminations on perception seem relevant: for him, consciousness constructs external reality (he too cites phantom limb syndrome), and he distrusts even the senses in conveying to us an objective external world, alluding to how changing perspective adjusts our ideas of what we are seeing: “Towers that had seemed round from afar occasionally appeared square at

close quarters. Very large statues mounted on their pedestals did not seem large to someone looking at them from ground level” (Descartes 1998: 95). Husserl goes even further: “We must bear in mind that *what things are* ... are as things of experience. Experience alone prescribes their meaning” (Husserl 2012: 91).

So, if we apply this principle to reading, we may surmise that if a piece of writing leaves gaps to be filled in by the mind of the reader, the reader will project their own ghosts out into the fragments put in front of them, because that is what a reader does with any text, however open or closed it may appear to be, with Sherlockian intensity: “Holmes has a spooky ability to look at a certain outcome – a corpse, a smattering of clues – and see the whole rich story that led up to it. ... We each have a little Sherlock Holmes in our brain” (Gottschall 2013: 99-100, 102). Reader-response is perhaps most obviously a factor when considering modernist and post-modern poetry, as indeed Iser himself recognises (Iser 1972: 285), for example the syntactically coherent, semantically impenetrable Gertrude Stein – “The change in that is that red weakens an hour” (Stein 2006: 1) – the cut-up maestro Tom Phillips –

unpack  
delight

savour  
the old  
adventure.

(Phillips)

– or J. H. Prynne. Prynne superimposes multiple snippets drawn from a variety of sources, including “shamanism; Chinese; metallurgy; medieval and Tudor music; botany; and geology” resulting in a “mesh of indirectness” that both invites and defies comprehension (Noel-Tod 2016). Richard Kerridge comments on the “dialectical exchange” between “fragments,” in which “the poetic effect consists of the interaction of contrasting and opposing elements that continue to challenge and transform each other” (Prynne 2018: 10-11), allowing for a seemingly endless dynamism of shifting coherence, in which the juxtaposition of unrelated fragments creates semantic gaps that require the reader to, in Husserl’s words, “supply their meaning.” Consider the effects of a poem like this, for example:

Just a treat sod Heine you notice  
 the base going down, try to whistle  
 with a tooth broken. Safe in our hands  
 won't cut up rough, at all, pent up  
 and boil over. Fly, my brother, he watches  
 a point of entry, only seeming to  
 have a heart for it. Thermal patchwork  
 will tell, sisal entreaty creams out. (Prynne 2018  
 38)

We learn from annotations that “safe in our hands” is from *The Times* in 1983, quoting Margaret Thatcher on the NHS, and “Fly, my brother” recalls *King Lear* and a tale of murderous betrayal of trust (Prynne 2018: 92-93). Does this information help us to make sense of the poem? And how are the semantic gaps between the fragments thus thrust together filled in by the reader? The information adds something certainly about seemingly protective figures threatening our health and lives. But what or who is Heine? And what does “sisal entreaty creams out” mean? Google reveals that “sisal” is a Mexican plant, used for rope-making, and nowadays generally for cats’ baskets and scratching posts. But was it once used for hanging, I wonder? Would it change the poem to see a condemned man lurking in its shadows, or a pampered cat? Must I choose between them? The poem encourages continual detecting effort, but without a final “whodunnit” conclusion; all its associations and connections and the exercise of reading it become entirely a (rigorous) exercise of my own imagination. “[A]uthors,” says Jonathan Gottschall, “trick the readers into doing most of the imaginative work” (2013: 4).

These notions of seemingly outer worlds being constructed in the imagination, are suggestive, especially if such constructions are not necessarily shared (Husserl talks about multiple such worlds: 2012: 86). Particularly in light of Gottschall’s assertion above, we may think of these readings as analogous to the Rorschach effect of juxtaposed fragments which construct unique and unplanned meanings for each viewer. This disruption of objective reality brings me round again to the theme of ghosts: “are they real?” becomes an irrelevant question. And finally, if a piece of writing had actual gaps within it, as in Charles Bonnet Syndrome, would that not be in itself a fitting form for the subject-matter, so that the poem would only be half-apprehended, translucent, like a ghost?

This last thought gave me my starting point. The

method it suggested to me is to provide suggestive skeletal arrangements, leaving much to the reader’s imagination, a Barthesian *scriptible* text. This can be done by fragmenting and dislocating selected material in various ways. As a typical example, here is one poem:

**Account**

woke bending .  
 I could not grey succulent  
                   pattering  
 fell , down  
 end of the stood for  
 , swaying from sickly within  
 a cowl low  
 something a dream drip kiss  
                   of course white notes ; accounts  
 Did Did a red voice sent  
 lemon-sharp a spike of light  
 half-drawn iced silence  
                                   had all the country

To produce such a poem, a starting point would be to write a generic, indeed somewhat clichéd, story, so that even fragments of it might trigger a familiar scenario. Here is mine:

I woke suddenly, and saw a figure bending over the foot of my bed. I could not see the face. A long grey robe fell from its shoulders, down below the end of the blankets. It stood for a while, swaying from side to side with a sickly motion, and from within the cowl over its head a low voice said, like something half-heard in a dream, Did you forget, Did you forget ... The moon sent a vivid beam in between the half-drawn curtains, and outside the wind had dropped and all the country slept.

The next stage is to add more layers. The walls between dream and reality become porous in my story, as between living and dead, substantial and insubstantial. This chimed in well with my interest in dissolving the borders between reader and writer, and I also thought further about borders between the senses; so I applied synaesthesia, and asked myself about the taste of grey, what the voice looks like, what silence feels like on the skin, what the moon smells of. I chose to add sound as a further layer (Google gave me “drip” and “kiss” from a website listing cartoon film sounds effects), and a couple of ambiguous rogue words floated in (“notes” and

“accounts”). Finally, I took a scalpel to my story, removing most of it. I left gaps where text had been cut out, arranged the words in new lines, and layered in the synaesthetic comments, and the sounds.

This was how I raised a ghost where previously I had only a space. The poem now suggests various things to me that were not there when I started. It suggests an intimate, painful apprehension, even embracing, of mortality (“I could not grey ... sickly ... swaying” but also “succulent” and “kiss”); “succulent” also makes me think of “succubus”; I sense guilt in “accounts,” which might be a weighing up of what is owing (metaphorically), but on the other hand it might simply be the recording of ghostly sightings, or perhaps it is both. I sense regret at something irrevocably *done* (“Did ... did” – perhaps the “red voice” is holding me to account); the “spike of light” just popped in at the editing stage, and has a surgical, uncomfortable feel to me, a probing that maybe I don’t want, and it does more than the “vivid beam” I first wrote. But another reader, or I on another day, might make up different meanings. The gaps and juxtapositions allow for ambiguous, shifting coherence, dependent on a “smattering of clues.” Others may find different materials and starting points for their own poems using this process, and it is also possible to play the same game with a found text and random additions of sensory terms.

### Releasing Angels – Oz Hardwick

“Most writers,” observes Dianne Doubtfire, “feel that it is incredibly difficult to start, even with plenty of time at their disposal” (Doubtfire 2003: 5). For, as well as finding the time to write, we also need to carve out spaces – physical perhaps, psychological most certainly – within busy environments which are rarely ostensibly conducive to writing. With ambient noise and other auditory distractions, it is difficult to focus on “what we want to say,” and the looming blank page itself recedes into the surrounding room, children, television, cats, and so on. Indeed, such is the semi-mythical nature of ideal writing conditions that early in his book, Heffron offers a writing prompt that begins: “Fantasy time. Describe your ideal writing space ...” (Heffron, 2000: 27). Rather than providing an excuse for not writing, it is my contention that these disruptions should be embraced, as they may themselves provide stimuli, not only for writing, but for writing which one would perhaps not otherwise produce.

To draw an example from the plastic arts, a quite possibly apocryphal story recounts how, when he was asked about sculpture, Michelangelo replied that, “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it. I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.” While the writer’s art is often characterised as making words appear on a blank page, it is arguably more practical to let the page shrink into the sensory overload of the moment, and to, in terms of this anecdote, “set the angel free.” But where does one begin?

Pareidolia, though an esoteric term, is something with which I am sure all of us will be familiar to some extent. It is that phenomenon by which we interpret vague or random stimuli as a pattern or image of something that is not there. Visually, this may be seeing a slumped figure in a pile of discarded bin bags, or the face of Mother Theresa in a bread roll; less commonly, it may manifest itself as hearing voices in the sound of the wind, or in the rattle of a railway carriage. We are predisposed to conjure forms where they do not exist, and they take the shape of things we already know, but that we may not have been conscious of at that particular moment (Robson 2014). And it is in this predisposition that we may find in the daily – or even momentary – jumble of sights, sounds, smells, and other sensory experiences, the words that are already there, waiting for us to free them.

In order to find the words within, it is first necessary to overcome the barriers we may erect by imposing our personal agendas onto proceedings: as noted above, we all probably have more ideas than we’ll ever use, so we just need to trust that we’ll discover the shape of one of them. Glyn Maxwell invokes Auden when making the point that it’s much more important to love playing with words than having “something to say,” observing that through doing so, “by the time [he] had something to say [he] had a pretty good idea how to.” (Maxwell 2012: 73-74). I would like to take this further, and suggest that it can be through playing with words – the words that we just happen to have around (and inside) us at any given moment – that we can discover which of our ideas, which of the many things we want to say, is already within them. We each develop our own writing practices: I customarily write for thirty minutes over breakfast, a time which in my household would fulfil very few people’s criteria for ideal writing circumstances: I will still be waking

up, perhaps remembering the outline of a dream; checking my diary and emails; thinking about day-to-day domestic tasks; being more or less aware of any broader concerns occupying my thoughts; and taking in snatches of breakfast television, and of local radio intruding from the kitchen. All of this makes for a huge, dense block of metaphorical stone. Where is the angel? To take an example from my own work, I will describe some aspects of a morning late in 2017 which led to a prose poem that appeared in my chapbook *Learning to Have Lost* (Hardwick 2018).

It is around 7.00 am and it's raining hard, though I don't mind as I'll be working from home. My wife and I have just engaged in the weekly duvet-wrangling ritual, and the washing machine's throbbing with bed linen, providing a rhythmic backing for a news item about the fortieth anniversary of Christiaan Barnard's first human heart transplant. I'm old enough to remember this, though I was only 7, and what I was really interested in was space and Rupert Bear. So I Google the Apollo programme, because the dates I remember – particularly Apollo 8, artefacts from which I saw recently in Chicago, and Apollo 11, because *everyone* remembers that – are a bit later: but while I'm looking up space exploration, I'm really thinking about my old Rupert books that were stored in my parents' house in Plymouth, and about finding them after my mother died and I had to sort and sell everything. And for no reason I can explain, I think of being very small and going to Buckland Abbey where Sir Francis Drake had lived, and of how those Rupert books always had an origami page, and of how I've always liked the sound of the word "origami," and of William Reynolds-Stevens' sculpture *A Royal Game* (1906) which shows Elizabeth I and Philip of Spain playing chess with ships. These are just a few of the unchecked thought impressions that accompany the news report, the washing machine, and the beginning of another day. As I habitually do – I am a great proponent of the *habit* of writing in order to apprehend and embrace the chaotic and random as it happens – I begin typing:

### **Origami**

As you fold the sheets, it reminds me of the Great Origami Craze of '68-'69. Wherever you went, there were people folding squares into something-or-other: frogs that hopped when you tapped them with a pencil, lotuses that opened to reveal Shiva, delicately balanced and

winking. Some days, the air was so thick with planes that you had to fold bell-like umbrellas to keep their sharp noses at bay. On rainy days, gutters would become armadas of frigates and galleons, each bristling with guns that pinged matchsticks off passing traffic. Origami was prime time entertainment, there were special live broadcasts at breakfast time from the world championships in Mexico City, and soaps would end on a seemingly impossible crease, leaving the nation anxiously awaiting the outcome the following evening. A surgeon won the Nobel Prize for the first successful origami heart, and when those gloved astronaut hands planted the first origami stars and stripes on the Moon, the whole world held its breath and watched. You, being those few years younger, don't remember it, but the way you fold the pillow cases, sharp edge to sharp edge, could have stopped paper clocks.

Looking at this now I can see that, apart from those influences mentioned above, the 1968 Mexico Olympics also came in from somewhere – presumably just as part of a train of thought that looped around the late 60s – as did a brass statue of Shiva that my parents bought for my birthday one year. And looking at that last line, there may well have been an echo of Auden in response to the deaths of my parents, but I couldn't be sure.

The important point about the above example, though, is that what this half-hour produced was a surreal – and I think tender – poem about the comfort of small domestic rituals in a crazy world. There was no plan, other than to look in an unprejudiced way at all the words and images outside and inside my head, and cut away the unimportant ones until I was left with the shape in the centre; saying what I wanted to say but didn't know that I wanted to say it, in a way that I would not have done had I begun with a specific idea and aim. It is a process that privileges everything within one's range of perception above the blank page, to such an extent that the very idea of the blank page doesn't even occur.

### **Conclusion**

In describing the processes that we employ in our writing, what I hope we have suggested are strategies which may enable the would-be writer to view the blank page neither as a terrifying adversarial



challenger to be overcome in a life-and-death struggle, nor as an endless, featureless prospect into which one cannot imagine entering without being swallowed by emptiness. Rather, it is a small space within which one may, by cultivating attentiveness to

what is already present at its edges (both physical and conceptual), summon one's own ghosts and release a multitude of angels.

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## About the Authors

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# First Pages

## Questions for Editing

Rose Michael, Michelle Aung Thin  
and Ronnie Scott

### ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between the substance of a novel and the surface through which it's expressed? In this paper, three researchers who write fiction, edit fiction, teach creative writing and research creative writing methodologies share revisions to their "first pages" – whether these are the first pages written in a novel project, or the introductory material of their final publications – to consider how the "micro" act of line-editing the sentence signposts more "macro" motivations and associations. In particular, they trace the political and artistic considerations that go into their individual conceptions of authenticity and voice, teasing out the specific questions arising in the context of their own processes which have enabled them to shape the ethics and aesthetics of their novels. This paper aims to contribute to creative writing methodology – a process of thinking, reading, writing, reflecting, and editing – by exposing the relationship in three varied examples between developmental work, intention, point-of-view and voice. Through three case studies that trace works in progress to their final, edited forms, it explores knowledges contained in final fictional works, asking how they are developed through line editing and copyediting and localised in the sentence.

## Introduction: First Questions

As writers and editors – and lecturers in both disciplines – we three share an ability to get inside the “voice” of a work: the head of a character, or the style of another author. This is a creative-writing technique, or talent, that has stood us in good stead personally, as editors of our own works, and professionally, as editors of others people’s, including student work. We use scare quotes around the word “voice” because the question we have been asking ourselves – and the focus of this research, as we work to distil the intuitive, creative “art” of writing and editing into a more concrete “craft” that is replicable, and teachable – is *how* do we do that? What tricks of pen or perspective allow us, repeatedly, to make that imaginative leap? What kind of negotiations take place as we develop the “authentic” voice that also lends us a sense of authority over our material?

In this paper we explore how the “micro” act of line-editing (copyediting adjectives, cutting adverbs, challenging word choices, and correcting tenses or questioning perspectives etc.) signposts more macro motivations and associations – which may be issues of story and theme(s) or concern politics and representation beyond the page. We try and identify specific changes that capture or reflect the big-picture considerations (which we may barely be aware of, or be all-too-aware of) that connect our text to the broader epitextual context that must, and should, frame our reading and writing, rereading and rewriting. We track our own changes, through draft examples and proof pages, to detail the considerations that, in turn, through further iterations of the (re)writing process, guided our *righting*.

A key aspect of this reflexive, creative, writing and editing process is to pose questions that challenge draft assumptions and effectively identify the best methods and methodologies for any particular project. As such, although our case studies share a common line of inquiry – how revision at the sentence level guides, reveals, or challenges our thinking at the macro level – each example addresses the question from a different angle, in response to the specific aims and challenges of that divers project. In this way our first example ranges more broadly, where our last is most particular. Taken together, we hope these three case studies offer editors, writers, and scholars insight into the relationship between sentences and structures, as we see it: interlinked,

as expressions, complications, and shadows of each other.

## CASE STUDY/AUTHOR I: *The Art of Navigation*

When I considered the scenes from my latest novel that were most challenging – for me, and the two editors I worked closely with – I realised they were also the ones that changed the most over the long period of writing. It struck me that point of view, that basic technical consideration, was key to many of the (re)iterations. What I wanted to understand was *why*: what underlying problem did revising this aspect reveal, and how was it I (intuitively or only semi-consciously) thought reworking this might correct that?

*The Art of Navigation* is a literary speculative fiction that slips between three different time periods – 1987, 1587 and 2087 – to tell a tale that’s at once the story of teen psychosis, and/or the fantastic possession of an 80s Bon Jovi-loving virgin by a charismatic character from English history. Nat and her best friends conduct a half-serious séance to call forth bushranger Ned Kelly while a world away in times Edward Kelley – alchemist, necromancer and crystal-ball ‘scryer’ for the court of Elizabeth the First – is beset by visions. Of a virgin ...

Before I had any idea what the “plot” would be, or the slightest clue about the final three-part structure the novel would follow (each section is set centuries apart and loosely mirrors different genre conventions: Gothic, fantasy and science fiction), I knew this book would be about Elizabeth the First. (Who was not, in fact, Britain’s first Virgin Queen, though she was certainly a queen of PR) I wanted to explore the idea of virginity – that elusive, contested site of largely “feminised” sexuality and teenage identity. What did/does it mean to be virginal? But for the same reason that my thoughts turned to Good Queen Bess she was not necessarily the best or easiest character to write: how could *I* authentically, originally, (re)present *her* majesty? There is an inherent tension in writing someone from history who is so well known: they “fall” too easily into cliché.

In the end I focussed on the three key relationships wherein historians agree Elizabeth may, or may not, have “lost” her virginity. I resolved to stick to the “facts” of the public record: I did not want to challenge Elizabeth Regina’s own story/ies but rather

to offer a new take on my – *our* – conception of this liminal threshold. (An ambition that ultimately took me in a very different direction ... Though you could probably still say *The Art of Navigation* is about virginity, just not Elizabeth's.)

In fact, each of these three scenes nearly got cut – on the advice of one editor – which is one way to do away with any problems of representation! But I was justifiably wary of such wholesale erasure. In my first novel, *The Asking Game*, an editor cut much of one character's point of view – admittedly because I'd made the rookie writing mistake of bouncing between perspectives in conversations that charted both the course of a romantic relationship and the road-trip that structured the book. The unintended consequence of this deletion was that Drew (it seems important to name him), ended up as a foil to the protagonist rather than a “round” character in his own right, to use EM Forster's term for a “real life” character with his own motivations and reflections as well as reactions (1980). There are other ways to solve the problem of competing, (over)revealing interiorities which would allow for diversity without risking readerly disidentification or jeopardising storytelling momentum. This time I was resolved to find them.

### **Extract 1.1: Thomas Seymour (700 words).**

*When the young Elizabeth's father Henry VIII died she was sent to live with his sixth wife, Catherine Parr, and her new husband Thomas Seymour – brother of Henry's third wife; uncle of Elizabeth's half-brother, the new King. 'Fierce in courage, courtly in fashion' the forty-year-old Baron of Seymour was bade by the Princess's Governness to 'go away in shame' when he was found 'romping' in fourteen-year-old Elizabeth's bed.*

The first pages I wrote for this triptych of possible-sex scenes, describing the incident that teenage Elizabeth would be tried for – which would lead to Baron Seymour, literally, losing his head – were originally written in the first-person. This mode is so ubiquitous today that it's often the default choice for emerging writers. (During my time as a trade publisher I frequently heard authors advised to try recasting their work from that popular point of view – and in what David Jauss aptly describes as the “relentless” present tense (2011) – though I would argue issues of immediacy and narrative traction can be addressed in more artful, or crafty, ways.) The

question these early drafts posed was how I – a forty-something 21st-century mother – could possibly imagine what Elizabeth the First might have felt. Or even understand what might have/not happened: it wasn't only a question of communicating *according to* but also *in accordance with* her perspective.

Along with the idea of romantic love, the act of sex – particularly the probability, or even possibility, of female pleasure – was conceived very differently four hundred years ago.

Official records can conceal as much as they reveal. As Rebecca Solnit says, “You can use the power of words to bury meaning or to excavate it.” (2014) In my research I read of lords who denied that what they did with servants they shared a bed with was sex – that was, by their definition, what you did with someone of the opposite sex – and who was I to say otherwise when theirs was/is the context that made meaning of the act in question? I began to understand that the research question I was exploring through the practicing of diverse points of views was how to write Elizabeth and Thomas's bedroom “romp” in a way that maintained different, conflicting versions of an event that had taken place behind closed doors and beyond the pages of history books. The circumstances may seem as clear to a modern reader as they did to her contemporary accusers – even if the roles and responsibilities of the individuals involved are understood differently – but the Princess convinced a court (and perhaps herself) of her innocence and, by implication, the relationship's. Who was I to (re)write this historic conclusion?

Elizabeth may have been a teenager at the time, but she was already determined to be mistress of her own destiny. Despite being a “bastard” for much of her childhood, she'd been raised as a Princess (though she preferred the title “Prince”) and had received an excellent education: she read Latin at the age of three and may even have been tutored by pre-eminent mathematician Dr Dee – who would later, in the time of my tale, hire possible-charlatan Edward Kelley as his assistant. Elizabeth would have been well aware, more so than my readers, that any man who “possessed” her might also stake a claim to the throne – as lover, future husband, or father of a potential heir. What words could describe, and not conscribe, the Queen's desire and/or her Elizabethan relationship to it? How should I convince my audience that accusing a stepfather-uncle of impropriety might establish one's own (worse) fault

... of non-virginity? And, crucially, why did I need to make them believe Elizabeth saw it that way?

Was it any surprise that early in the redrafting process I adopted the more traditional – perhaps more respectful – third-person perspective? Restricted, admittedly, since so much of the pleasure of (reading and writing) novels lies in the imaginative, empathic leap of character co-creation.

Perhaps what is most interesting about this extract is not what changed over time, but what stayed the same. Throughout its many iterations the writing remained in the past tense – that frequent companion to third-person point of view, which is recognised by many literary theorists as a narrative rather than temporal mode. A storytelling style that is not necessarily, or properly, “past”. This early episode was always going to be “backstory” for the future-Queen my main characters would meet later, in 1587 ... though its place in the novel would be constantly reconsidered, depending on *who* was going to remember, recount, or dream the scene (I will come back to this idea, of points of view within a point of view; how I tried to craft a final effect that maintained myriad, in/discrete perspectives).

This example from *The Art of Navigation* demonstrates how the same content can be (re)positioned and/or (re)purposed throughout the writing process – consciously or not – in accordance with bigger-picture considerations. Like dream symbolism, or poetic imagery, such tableaux are touchstones that reveal the “real” story (I am not thinking of plot, but the possible political ramifications of fictional representations, for example), which we can – and must – then use as a guide to revisit the very scenarios that engendered them.

Draft text clues us to the context we are working in – and with, and through – which then directs edits of said text.

### Extract 1.2: Francis d’Anjou (1400 words)

*Considerably younger than Elizabeth, the twentysomething Francis Duke of Anjou and Alençon would be seen as the late-forties Queen’s last chance at love. But the Privy Council will say her people’s hearts ‘be galled’ if their Sovereign were to take a Frenchman – and a Papist, too! Elizabeth will pen a poem ‘On*

*Monsieur’s Departure’ (as artful as what the future will think of as her father’s ode), to work her princely rage into a more virginal mode.*

This longer scene involved the most rewriting of any in the novel: I seemed unable to portray Queen Elizabeth as genuinely invested or emotionally engaged in her alleged love affair with the French King’s brother. Clearly my professional ability betrayed a personal opinion that I wasn’t even aware, until then, I held. I resolved to recast the rendezvous from the point of view of a man of her time. Writing Elizabeth from the “outside” perspective of a potential sexual partner (he wished!), enabled me to re/present her via the iconography she so expertly cultivated, and manipulated – consciously offering herself as a ready substitute for the (Catholic) Virgin she had so roundly ousted. I was putting her back in control of her story.

Still I struggled to achieve the telepathic magic – across time and space (which is really what *The Art of Navigation* is about) – so I added another layer: re/moving the perspective still further to write Elizabeth not through the eyes of her suitor, but his emissary. I was inspired by the dreams reported by men of her time, sometimes in the confessional!, as having about their Queen; the scandalous, semi-pornographic drawings that circulated; and the ambassador who wrote home about the “withered dug” of the British Monarch, who dared to wear the low-cut bodice and loose hair of a virgin ... and clearly succeeded in achieving some strategic distraction by doing so.

Recognising how this technique helped me, I repeated it: removing the viewer still further so that the scene became a fantasy Edward Kelley “sees” in his crystal ball. (For a time I even tried writing it in the future tense, as it appears here, wanting to convey – via the unfamiliar subjunctive, with its conditional aspect – both the hypothetical nature of this vision, and the old-fashioned thinking and out-of-time nature of Kelley’s character.)

The final twist, where my story ends, has Kelley in turn “possessed” by a young Australian girl on the cusp of womanhood. After hearing Angela Meyer discuss her novel at the Speculate Literary Festival in Melbourne (March 2019) – which features a similar, and similarly cross-gendered, point of view within a point of view – I have come to see this as a fundamentally, dare I say *essentially*, feminist act. While Nat is clearly closer to my – and my readers’ –

perspective, she is still markedly different and brings her own perspective as an 80s virgin, about to ‘lose it’ ... on the verge of a psychotic break brought on by drink and drugs.

In (de)scribing diverse concurrent but irreducible points of view, I sought to create a polyvocal work that used Elizabethan language and imagery, de Semier’s desire and Kelley’s ambition – all framed by Nat’s foci – to convey the multiple versions, the *multiplicity*, of Elizabeth the First. And play with the idea that someone could, *can* perhaps, at a particular moment in or outside of time occupy those most-mutually-exclusive of states: in being (not) a virgin.

### Extract 1.3: Robert Dudley (700 words)

*History remembers Elizabeth’s childhood sweetheart, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, as the most likely lover: on the day of her accession she makes him Master of the Horse; when he dares wed, in secret, she sends him to the Tower. You might have thought they’d be free to marry when his first wife dies, but our Queen knows better than to go near such scandal – falling down the stairs indeed! Her Rob stays single for nearly two decades, waiting. Bess remains unwed her whole life long.*

Finally – do you see? – I tried the second-person address. I couldn’t sustain it, of course, not many writers can, but at the first page stage it seemed an obvious way to connect (with) contemporary audiences; to invite them in to an historical situation that was so far removed from a modern perspective. I also adopted the present tense, for similar reasons: I wanted to communicate the sense that this love was/is ongoing, before and after all others. That it was “real”, even if never realised in the way people of either age might expect.

The question of what was real, what had “really” happened – which we might consider creatively as issues of authenticity and legitimacy – was superseded during the writing and editing of *The Art of Navigation* by another: whose story was it? Whose story is it? As my draft progressed it began to feel less and less like mine and more and more like that of the characters from history I was channelling, or, perhaps, who possessed me. (Which is what the book literally became about.) Ultimately the issue was one of authority. How could I make this story mine? Why would I?

Throughout the creative (re)drafting practice, and within the final published work, I negotiate the ethics – and aesthetics! – of representation via the mechanism of point of view, and to a lesser extent the mechanics of tense. In this way, via these means, I sought to balance my desire to give a voice to a character constrained by her time, yet resist using discursive devices to further contain, or detain, her. James Baldwin is famous for saying that when you’re writing “you’re trying to find out something which you don’t know”. (1984) We frequently admonish students to write not what they know, but what they don’t know and want to know. But Baldwin actually said: “writing for me is finding out what you don’t want to know, *what you don’t want to find out*, [my emphasis] but something forces you to anyway.” (1984) This (not) wanting makes it imperative we ask questions – of ourselves and other writers – at first pages. Writing conceals as much as it reveals; it is in the rewriting, the revisioning, that we sift the layers – shift slashes and dashes, to double meanings – and *right* the real politics of fictional perspectives.

### CASE STUDY/AUTHOR II: THE ADVERSARY

What is the sentence in relation to the mass of hope, meaning, interest and failure that is the final work? It is both the material expression of these and other qualities and the thing itself (there are only sentences; there is no final work). However, if the “final work” for writers has been hurled into the future, a thing that will eventually be written, made and known through a process of imagination and drafting, then sentences are at once the tools that build this final work and precognitive clues to its eventual shape, to be heeded or avoided.

In this case study, I will use a work-in-progress begun in 2013 and now in late stages of editing for publication in 2020 to examine what the writer knows and doesn’t know, evidenced by changes in the manuscript’s first paragraph. How does what the writer knows and what the writer doesn’t know guide a process of revision towards a final work? How do the sentences we write lead to major decisions about theme, plot, and particularly in this case study character?

When I am employed as a copy-editor, my aim may be clarity or cleanliness; as a writer, I am seeking to discover what I don’t know, to test aesthetic

effects, to build a relationship to my project through determining and learning its rules and strictures. Each of these crafts involves playing around with the same materials, but while the former requires knowledge of the final work, the latter may be aided by a commitment to not-knowing and indeed a trust in the generation of material to result in meaning. You can't read your tea leaves without making a bit of tea. By tracing the development of first paragraphs in a project over time, I aim to show how intention is expressed indirectly through text as an author both tests propositions and makes various deals with their project and themselves. As drafts are provisional sites, my five-and-a-bit excerpts contain bad writing, written towards the construction of the good.

I began the project without a plan, but knowing I wanted to make work about sexuality, particularly gay men, and a title, *The Adversary*, which has stayed the same across the six-year drafting process. Although I was plotless and planless, a title contains intent. Something adverse may mean something opposed or opposing – it becomes a positional or relational word – which is a nice way to situate a work about a group that can also be considered “inverts”. Archaically an “adversary” is the devil. And although the word suggests conflict, it also suggests more: the kind of protagonist who'd have an “adversary” not an enemy or rival would probably suit Janet Malcolm's definition of the melodramatist, one who “views human conduct as a mechanical response to the inorexable pressure of events set in motion by the malign motives of others” (1997: 88). Yet this disguises a utopian impulse. The adversarial justice system proposes that when two separate people go really hard on a topic from two opposing angles, they will arrive in the middle, and there will be the truth. As editors and writers, we know that language is a negotiation between producer and recipient; there is no elephant of truth in the middle of the room, waiting to be spotted and described. If the adversarial system is utopian – doomed to failure – what might its other functions be?

So, this would be a novel about a close relationship between two young people, a hope of doing good, a sense of fatality and doom, and a willingness to argue. None of this could yet be articulated by me; I liked the title because it sounded important and forbidding, had four jagged syllables and a definite article. However, these aesthetic choices – such as those addressed in copy-editing – both guide and evidence meaning.

### Extract 2.1: November 2013

*I twisted the hot water knob to a pressure marked "destroy" and let the jet jelly me into a chaud-froid. By the time I'd towelled off I was damp again, the thin, uncalled-for sweat of these summery nights which streamed in sudden rivulets from a surprising choice of pores.*

This is my earliest draft. Why didn't I write “I turned the water on”? I'm sure it was important to me at the time that “let” rhymed with “jet” and that “jet” and “jelly” shared what Gary Lutz calls “alphabetic DNA” (2009) and the rest of us call “sounds and letters”. My natural tendency is to mess around with language at the expense of character and plot, and no reader will thank you for it.

But character and plot will not be avoided. Many early drafts start with characters waking up or showering, metaphors for the blank page and the writer's instruction to themselves that the relationship to character will be intimate. But there are plenty of ways for a character (and a writer) to take a shower and in my case they turned out to have consequences. I arrived at the unnecessary word “chaud-froid” by looking for things that could be both jellied and firm, trying to describe the raw but overworked feeling of flesh in hot water (it's a kind of jellied meat), but it automatically defines the speaker. They probably aren't the kind of person who cares a lot about food – the world's top 1000 foodies probably haven't thought about the word “chaud-froid” this week – but they are probably a person attracted to language and a sense of high culture associated with Europe; not everybody associates high culture, food, and Europe.

These turned out not to be quite right, but a senseless detail still asks questions of the writer. It's strange to think of pores as “chosen” by sweat, or that the choice might be “surprising” (to who? The sweater?), but the final work contains plot points about water (showers, baths, ocean swims, hot tubs, and near-drownings); body fluids (sweat, saliva, HIV); choice and fate; surprise and shock; awkwardness with bodies; class and food; not Europe, but class associations with other Western countries such as the USA; towels (actually, several major plot points involving towels); and summer (it's a story that plays with the notion of the “summer that changed your life”). This turns out to be some useful bad writing, even if we don't yet know it.

## Extract 2.2: May 2014

*To make things worse, it was a time in which it appeared wholly necessary to find the longest possible ways to say the simplest possible things. At one stage, he was on a date and waving both his hands, saying "we only get one of these, we only get one of these," gesturing around them at the brute fact of all this, the improbable crab cake, described as a "petit four", the shiba inu prancing under the pandanus fronds.*

This first paragraph is part of a long deviation in which I wrote pieces in several modes and voices trying to determine the purpose and direction of the work (remember – I don't yet know that the purpose and direction are there, and of course my interpretation of the first paragraph in the previous section only seems obvious in hindsight – that bad first paragraph could point you in many directions, you are at once determining *and* evidencing what you mean).

In this new paragraph, the central question is "does third person work for this story", with its enriched tension between focalised character, author and narrator? However, I choose this extract now because questions about character and plot are continuing to narrow and harden through a process of sorting and shifting around. Sweat and pores in this paragraph are no longer surprising. Food is surprising; the crab cakes are "improbable"; shock, surprise, and likelihood play a role in this world. Meanwhile, the burden of demonstrating a social milieu has shifted from food to dogs; unlike the chaud-froid, which is favoured by no one, the shiba inu is an item favoured by white middle class gay yuppies (or, honestly, one I happened to date). Class and class signifiers will play a role in this world. The summer is suggested by dogs and plants, which may appear indoors in a wintry environment but it's less likely than somewhere outdoors and warm. There are no dog breeds in the final work, or pandanus fronds (?), or crab cakes, but it's a process of testing.

## Extract 2.3: October 2014

*The art of love depends firstly on the point of engagement, and I met Chris Zimmer in his territory of choice. It was through his profile picture, which was a passport grid, or a replica of the effect produced by a passport studio - a selfie, filtered through third-party editing*

*applications, then run through a gallery builder, replicated times four, which had the effect of dressing up a pretty simple shot. It shrunk the picture, which made you squint to check that he was handsome, and caused its other signals to bedevil, bewitch, and blur. It suggested vanity - here is four of me - or perhaps a sense of humour: here is me, times four! Or was it analog nostalgia? Or a general sense of art? He was a swooning vision, a destabilising mirage that primed the ensorcelled viewer for some future assault. It was more an act of espionage than an act of war.*

I choose this extract because when digging through my saved drafts it's the first instance where I feel a sense that I am "with" my book, meaning I am at an intersection of plot/scope and character that feels comfortable and familiar to me – although the details are completely different (none of these sentences or phrases are in the book anymore) it's the right territory. When writing this extract, I have spent nearly a year with the project, so I have enough material behind me that I can start to make conscious choices about what I might do. I read *The Art of War* by Sun-Tzu (2002), thinking that it may provide a way in to a relationship between conflict and dating; the opening sentence adapts a precept of Sun-Tzu's originally written about war. It's obvious that this is a story about perception; the protagonist is going to spend the book analysing signals produced by other people; other people will be treated as a kind of alien species. I moved away from these tropes – the formal overlay of love and war, and the gay fiction trope of dating through technology – but both ideas needed to be articulated through language before they could be trusted as foundations of story and theme.

## Extract 2.4a: April 2017

*I was in the market for a way to change my life when I met the peculiar men who rapidly upturned it, across the span of three short weeks in one bad December. I was in the market for a supernatural sign: night sweats, hot hives, sphinxlike dreams. Bites from invisible sources.*

## Extract 2.4b: August 2017

*I was eagerly avoiding many ways to change my life when I met the peculiar men who gradually upturned it. As the weather warmed*



*in Melbourne and November slowly stopped, I wanted very much to stop with it. I was on the lookout for supernatural signs: night sweats, hot hives, sphinxlike dreams. Bites from invisible sources.*

Two and a half years later, most of my choices have been made, I have redrafted many times, added characters, I have the general shape of my story. But the sentences remain a site of negotiation, rather than clarification. In these two similar first paragraphs at a distance of four months, the most obvious change expresses a shift in structure – “rapidly” becomes “gradually” because the timeline has relaxed and the story now takes place over about three months. But the bigger question is about character, who they are and what drives them. They are not in pursuit of change. They sense that change is necessary, and a sense of basic self-preservation moves them towards change, but this is different from pursuit, and anyway entangled with the circumstances of the plot – what has been shaped by other people, or fate, and what does the character choose? I picked “eagerly avoiding” rather than “in the market” because I knew the character had to be active in some way, even if that activity was directed towards maintaining the status quo; I also thought this contradiction in terms – eagerly avoiding – would suggest something of the character’s difficult, adversarial nature. In practice, it was an awkward solution, so no solution at all – instead a site of ongoing questions.

#### **Extract 2.5: May 2019**

*I was in the market for a way to change my life when I came upon the obstacles that turned it upside down. But I could take no pleasure from being in this market, not having the wherewithal to recognise the place. The only thing I did was go outside on sunny days, and there I met a bunch of men – well, just a bunch of boys – who said things to me of varying cuteness, sometimes wearing interesting clothes. But go out in the right season, hang out at the right latitude, and owing to a sticky law of summery averages, the otherwise avoidable becomes pretty much inevitable – and fate is pretty much obliged to find out where you live.*

This is current as of this writing and it’s still not right. There are words in there that should be there in order to set scope and tone, such as “sticky” and “summery”, but in trying to squeeze them in I’ve

failed to give them sense – why is the law of averages sticky, what is being averaged, what are the qualities that make the averages summery? But there’s a repetition that pleases me, the doubled “pretty much”, and most importantly the character is sorted. Being “in the market” has a different sense than “in pursuit of” change; instead, the character is in a space in which change may be offered, which gets at both a sense of fate – some places are simply change-heavy – and a sense this may be navigated, ambivalently accepted, or avoided. There’s a scepticism towards capitalism, which is in line with the characters and plot, and I’ve come back to the idea that it’s a story about perception, which is a nice thing for the reader to understand early on – that the action will come from changed knowledge of the world, rather than the world necessarily changing.

Even at this latest stage, these are not necessarily changes that are determined (as if on a chart) and applied through a process of copy-editing aimed at identifying and then solving problems. Instead, problems are identified when they are written (that is, they start as nothing and emerge as problems); the responsibility of the writer is to make work, probably bad work, and keep an eye out for clues to hidden intention and possible ways forward. The draft remains the chart towards the final work until the final work supersedes it.

#### **CASE STUDY/AUTHOR III: Hasina, ‘Through My Eyes.’**

In 2018 I agreed to write a young adult novel for the series, “Through My Eyes,” which focuses on “children living in contemporary conflict zones” (White 2019). These books are aimed at Australian students aged 11 to 14 and previous titles have been set in Syria, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. My novel would be set in Rakhine state, Myanmar, among Rohingya children experiencing the military “clearance” operations of 2016 and 2017. While this has not been the first instance of attacks on this group, it is one of the most brutal and systematic and has had a dramatic effect; around 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar to seek refuge in camps over the border in Bangladesh. The book, published 3 September 2019, fills a gap in knowledge about not only this conflict but also about Myanmar geopolitics, elucidating the reasons for the attacks and their effects. It would also be a form of political action.

This case study looks at the line-editing decisions made for this book and the questions that arise as a result which reflect the wider discursive concerns of the narrative. There are three major questions I will address. First, what are the ethical, creative and craft requirements inherent to writing of a novel that represents an ongoing, contemporary conflict? To do this I will look at the changing ways I use “Burmese” and “Myanmar” in the text. Second, how do editors and writers negotiate respect for cultural authority, authenticity and good practice? Can a reliance on cultural authority mask political assumptions? Here, I will look at the use of the name Hasina. I will also refer to the terms “veil” which was replaced with “numal”. Finally, what are the political aims and principles that guided my aesthetic and technical decisions? In this part of the discussion I will draw from Luc Boltanski’s *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* (1999), in which he traces the philosophical frameworks for how a spectator might respond to the presentation of human suffering. Boltanski distinguishes between compassion as “local” and pity as “distant”, as well as “real” versus “fictional” emotion (I leave discussions about the nature of emotion elicited by writing and how it mitigates the distant and the local for future papers). I conclude this section of the paper by tracing my writerly decisions, aimed at making the distant local to elicit compassion rather than pity.

I was commissioned to write *Hasina, Through My Eyes*, after speaking on a panel alongside other Asian Australia writers. We were there to discuss diversity in Australian publishing at the invitation of Monash University and Melbourne’s Immigration museum. I spoke about my research into cosmopolitan Rangoon as well as my own ties with Burma—I was born there but left as an infant. One of the publishers in the audience mentioned me to the series editor, Lyn White, who looks for writers with a proven capacity to put together “strong, character-driven story lines” based on “meticulous research and understanding of the issues each war-torn region raises” (2019).

The ‘Through My Eyes’ series covers natural disasters and conflicts and there are ten books in the series to date. Each of the writers in the series has a personal tie with the conflict zone they represent. As a context, these books respond to the “continuing controversy surrounding Australia’s role in providing asylum for displaced peoples from the world’s war-zones, and the request by students for more books of this genre” (White 2019).

The books are written quickly. I signed the agreement to write *Hasina* in June, 2018 and as I write this, not quite a year later, we are at final pages and almost ready to send the manuscript to print. The market moves in concert with the news cycle and Allen & Unwin wanted the book ready to go while the crisis was still in the collective consciousness. At the time of writing, the UNHCR estimated that there were 68.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world. The Rohingya numbered around 700,000 of this estimate (UNHCR 2019 Rohingya Emergency). During the 12 months, I researched the crisis and drew up a few potential story outlines. Once we’d agreed on a direction, I did more research and wrote a detailed outline. At that point, I was able to begin writing a draft. My research was ongoing, as the process of tracking and documenting what had happened in Rakhine state began to be finalised by governments and NGOs, culminating in the release of UN and the US State department reports.

To expedite the process of producing the book, I was edited by the Series Editor, a copy-editor, a managing editor, a proof-reader and a publisher. The manuscript went through these main stages: one messy first draft; a tidied up first draft; a structural edit; a copy-edit (mainly to get it to length); proof-reading (for consistency and story coherence); first pages; final pages. In addition to the editorial staff at the publisher, I paid for a Myanmar translator and a young person from the Rohingya community to read the manuscript and make translations and corrections. I also sought readings from family members in the readership age-group as well as a neutral adult reader. This is a level of editing that I’ve never experienced before. It was, in many ways, a very collaborative process. Yet, as the writer, all final decisions were mine to make. The novel would be accompanied by notes for teachers, accessible online at the publisher’s website. These notes comprised an author biography including a statement of motivation for writing the novel as well as country background notes plus classroom activities set at different year levels. I was responsible for writing my biography, explaining my motivations as well as writing the country notes.

In 2017, the UN labelled the Rohingya “the most persecuted minority in the world.” More recently, the terms “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide” have been used. News coverage of the Rohingya crisis has been pervasive, dramatic and impossible to miss. The images are heavily mediated, most often featuring

dark-skinned people on the move, fleeing their uniformed attackers. The reporting of the emergency itself became news when two Reuters reporters were arrested for contravening the colonial era Official Secrets Act in 2017. They were famously represented by Amal Clooney, the wife of the American movie star George Clooney.

While coverage of the crisis was widespread and high profile, the complex history of Myanmar, which was until 2011, a military dictatorship and “pariah” state, and the circumstances of the Rohingya’s rights to citizenship, are less well understood within the readership. The UN’s assessment of the Rohingya as the world’s most persecuted minority positions their experience as at the greatest remove from the rest of the globe, let alone Australian school students – they are as “otherly” as it is possible to be.

This case study does not concern a project of my own devising and I would not have considered writing this book had I not been asked to do so. Thus, my artistic ambitions were simply to meet my brief and develop a story that was well-paced and both historically and culturally accurate, or, to put it into Boltanski’s terms, to make the “distant” feel “local” or create compassion in my reader rather than pity. In this aim, accuracy was especially important to me; Myanmar is still transforming from military state to democracy and the process has been and will continue to be a painful one. The military and the border police, the main agents behind the “clearance” operations against the Rohingya, are not answerable to the country’s elected civilian government, but rather to the powerful and independent National Defence and Security Council which houses the Ministries for Defence, Borders and Home Affairs (Lidnauer 74). The national curriculum too is biased, glossing over the “tensions between the ethnic minorities to focus on the majority Burman culture and history” (Ditlevsen 131). Nor is reliable information about the conflict always available inside the country; while pre-publication censorship had been lifted in 2012, the “broadcast media is still heavily controlled by the government” (Ytzen 42) and “70% of the country’s print media is based in Yangon ... leaving little coverage in rural areas where most Burmese live” (Ytzen 40). Thus, most ordinary people in Burma have not had access to an unbiased account of their own country’s history or to robust, high quality newsgathering services. Even though I was writing a novel about fictional characters, what I wrote about events and culture needed to be exact,

correct and clear, lest I do harm to ordinary people who were not themselves agents of war.

In the immediate aim of clarity, however, I was thwarted almost from the start by the question, do we refer to the country as Myanmar or Burma? This was an ongoing issue in the text that reflects the political question of how to respond to orchestrated human rights abuses. The USA, one of the last nations to retain sanctions on Myanmar and one of the first to reinstate them in the face of Rakhine ethnic cleansing, continues to recognise the country as Burma. This was in line with supporters of the struggle for democracy who, in 1989, protested at the junta changing the country’s name. By contrast, Australia has begun using Myanmar in recent years (DFAT 2019). “Burma” certainly carries with it connotations of the colonial. By 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi advised that it was ethical to use either name — previously she had favoured Burma (Press Association 2016). None of this was helpful to the book’s editors.

In the novel I use Burma and Myanmar almost interchangeably. I use the terms to refer to the country, the language and, at times, as an adjective. Early in the writing and editing process, the Series Editor suggested that we use Burma in the speech of the oldest character and Myanmar for younger characters when referring to the country. However, when it came to referring to the language, the problem became one of elegance. Burmese is far less clunky than Myanmar language or just Myanmar, which also relies on the context of the sentence for meaning. Yet, because there are so many ethnic languages spoken in the country — the government of Myanmar recognises 135 ethnicities (Ware 23) — we felt we should at least try to be precise with this, the most widely spoken tongue. There were further issues with other changed names, specifically, Arakan, which is the ancient name for the province now known as Rakhine, where the story is set. All of this was not only very confusing but telling. These issues over names echoed the controversy over the use of the word “Rohingya”, which is itself contested; it is not recognised as the name of a people in Myanmar and, even among scholars, its provenance has been debated (Charney 2005). Language is often a key site for persecution and certainly, the politics of usage was something that made the editing process difficult.

I decided we would preface the novel with an

explanation of usage. Here too we struggled to decide on how we would use the two terms and then, sustain that usage without affecting the flow of the text. Initially, our explanation just concerned the historical origins of the names. Here is our original preface note:

### **Extract 1.1 – Preface March 2019**

*Myanmar is often still referred to by its former name, Burma. In this book, we use Burma to refer to the country prior to 1989 and Myanmar to refer to the country after 1989. And, we use Burmese to refer to peoples and languages of Myanmar.*

But this was not sufficient as it didn't cover how I'd used the words. Instead of finding each instance of Burmese and Myanmar and rewriting, we considered:

### **Extract 1.2 – Revised preface 28 May 2019**

*Myanmar is often still referred to by its former name, Burma. In this book, we use Burma to refer to the country prior to 1989. We use Myanmar to refer to the country after 1989. There are three terms in use for the main language of Myanmar. We use Burmese and Myanmar and Myanmar language to refer to the language of Myanmar throughout this story.*

But that didn't cover "people". At this point – as I write this we are at final pages —we have settled on:

### **Extract 1.3 – Revised preface 30 May 2019**

*Myanmar is often still referred to by its former name, Burma. In this book, we use Burma to refer to the country prior to 1989. We use Myanmar to refer to the country after 1989. We use Burmese and Myanmar to refer to the peoples and language of Myanmar throughout this story.*

As mentioned earlier, my writing and research examines colonial and contemporary Burma and my cultural heritage is Burmese, all of which would seem to lend me a cultural authority over the material of the novel. Yet, I felt deep ambivalence towards the project for this very reason; while I was born in Burma, and various branches of my family lived there for four to five generations, I am not authentically Burmese. I migrated to Canada as an infant and although my grandparents remained

in Burma, I myself had not lived with the shortage of services and goods or the everpresent sense of danger typical under a military dictatorship. I am Anglo-Burmese, from a mixed-race group straddling European and Asian ethnicities. Finally, I have little personal experience of Islam in any of the ways it is practiced in the country and I have spent only a short time in Rakhine State.

Yet, in many ways, compared to the other authors in the series, my position as "cultural authority" looks highly appropriate. My name on the cover, and my face on the publicity material identifies me as someone of at least Asian and probably Burmese extraction. Most of the other books are set in Asia or the Middle East and are written by Australians of Anglo-Saxon origin.

I made mistakes. An example of the failure of my cultural authority is the title of the novel, originally *Hosina*. This was based on my first phase research into the conflict. I read an Office of the UN High Commissioner, Flash Report, in which a Rohingya witness reported the rape and subsequent death from injuries of a 16 year old girl.

There were also many young women and girls who were abused. I know three of them. Two came with us when we crossed the border, although I don't know where they are now. They were raped together with a third girl, Hasina. She is the one who was killed. She was from Kyet Yoe Pyin. She was my very close neighbour. She was 16. (OHCHR 2017)

I was very moved by her story, which read like an epitaph, and that the witness had chosen to name her as if this report of the circumstance behind her death were somehow also a means of memorialising her. The novels were usually titled after the protagonist. I decided to name the novel after Hasina.

In addition to this Flash Report, I read and re-read reports from the UN and the US State Department, Save the Children, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch as well as reportage, academic research articles and monographs. I interviewed members of the Rohingya community in Melbourne. My research was exhaustive. The first anniversary of the initial attacks fell a few months into the research and drafting process. I found myself reading further accounts of yet more extreme forms of violence as many reports were released. This is one of the

difficulties of writing such a book—the repetition and patterns of the violence ultimately lend it a scale that pushes the “spectator” away into a position of distance, where distance becomes disaffection. I took extensive notes. Yet, it was only when I came to show one of my interview subjects the book cover and she questioned the name Hosina that I realised my error. *Hasina* is a Rohingya name and Hosina is not. When I traced my way back through my research notes, I realised I’d misread my own handwriting, and typed Hosina instead of Hasina.

Apart from the name, Hasina, other character names also changed on the basis that they were more popular and familiar among the Rohingya community I had access to. Tabeer became Rukiah. In addition, I changed Habib to Araf because there was a high profile activist of that name. Personal names, however, were relatively straightforward compared to the names of everyday objects:

Hasina feels like she has swallowed a stone. Suddenly, her numal doesn’t feel dignified or modest or even polite. Instead, it feels like something that marks her out, that draws attention to her. Muslim.

It is an editorial policy that the ‘Through My Eyes’ books include some words in the language of the represented culture. One of these is the word for “veil”, which has been corrected from my first draft to “numal” in the extract above, which is from the copy-editing stage. Here too, in the selection of local languages, I encountered issues around cultural authority – even authoritarianism. First of all, several languages are spoken in Rakhine and I wanted to represent as many of them as the main characters were likely to hear. Numal was just one word in the glossary of 5 languages which included Rohingya, Myanmar, Bengali, Shan, Mro and Urdu.

However, when it came to finding Rohingya words, I found that there were no Rohingya translators available at the services I ordinarily use in Australia. Similarly, my networks in Myanmar failed to turn up qualified translators, although there are some services online as well as a large body of academic literature around the Rohingya language and origins. There are also websites with alphabets and words, which I looked at. Many words I’d used were Bengali in origin and which were not used by Rohingya, or at least not within the Rohingya community I consulted. I compiled a new list of terms for the book

as well as phonetic English spellings.

As we moved towards final steps of the process, I began to question the accuracy of the glossary. Where was the higher authority to corroborate the words, their spellings and meanings that my sources had supplied; most of my interviewees had fled Myanmar some time ago and had experienced serious disruptions to their education. The spellings they gave for the prayer times differed from those I’d found in one reputable English-language report and from those gathered by my Myanmar translator from her Muslim contacts. Was the glossary quite simply wrong? On the other hand, how could I not trust people to know their own language?

I have written elsewhere of the problem of writing from the margins being read as authentic, where authentic is also often seen as “representative” and yet here I was wanting the certainty of a representative source for the Rohingya language – a language I knew had been contested as a means of oppressing the group.

The Rohingya are “the most persecuted minority in the world”. Myanmar too, as a formerly closed state, is not well known to school-age Australians unlike, for example, other southeast nations such as Vietnam which is frequently visited. My brief in writing this book was to introduce the reader to this country, the various cultures within and to make it real to school-age readers as well as presenting the experience of the Rohingya children and their experience of war.

In *Distant Suffering*, Boltanski analyses the historical framework and “philosophical contradictions” of “spectators bombarded with mediated images of human misery” (Sawchuk 2002). He uses a spatial comparison to explain responses to suffering; “compassion” is inspired by the “local” whereas “pity” requires “distance”. These are the “positions” we spectators find ourselves in.

As a writer, it was my aesthetic and technical task to “move” the reader from distant to local, from pity to compassion. The examples above show that linguistic authenticity and our relationship to language is where the positions of “distant” and “local” are also played out. The distance between the languages present in the book – from Urdu to Rohingya to Mro to Burmese to English – are all made local to one another, through the pages of a book. Each and every relationship to language is political and thus, each

and every conversation we had about the editing of this book reflected the political. The negotiations between editors, writer and readers throughout this process, enact this spatial relationship between action – in this case, speaking out through writing and reading, both options instead of silence.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have shared revisions to our “first” pages – whether these were the first pages written, or the introductory material of their final publications – to consider: questions writers should ask themselves, or editors should ask their authors, questions a reader is likely to ask; questions a novel

may ask of a reader, and the novel asks of a writer. As novelists who teach writing and editing and as researchers interested in methodological approaches to the novel, we have selected extracts from our own works that demonstrate how “micro” line-editing not only inevitably reveals more “macro” structural and developmental editorial work taking place – beyond, as well as between, the pages – but must be directed by these bigger-picture considerations. We have traced these political and artistic considerations in the context of our own processes, teasing out the specific questions that have enabled us to shape an ‘authentic’ voice.

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## About the Authors

**Michelle Aung Thin** teaches at RMIT University in Australia. Her most recent novel, *Hasina* (Allen & Unwin 2019) is about ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. Her first novel, *The Monsoon Bride*, (Text 2011) is set in colonial Burma. Drawing from postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis, her academic work focuses on how hybrid identities contest sites of cultural meaning such as 'skin' and 'home' in southeast Asia. She was a National Library of Australia Creative Arts Fellow (supported by the Eva Kollman and Ray Mathew Trust) and the first Asialink writer in residence to Myanmar (funded by Arts Victoria).

Author of *The Asking Game* and *The Art of Navigation*, **Rose Michael** lectures in writing and publishing at RMIT. She has been editor of the national trade press journal *The Weekly Book Newsletter* and *Books + Publishing* magazine, commissioning editor at Hardie Grant Books, and was a co-founder of micro-press Arcade Publications. She has written about local independent publishing in *Logos: Journal of the World Publishing Industry* and with colleagues in the recent *Book Publishing in Australia: A Living Legacy* anthology.

Lecturer in Creative Writing at RMIT, **Ronnie Scott** founded *The Lifted Brow* in 2007. He is two-time recipient of MacDowell Colony Fellowships and a contributor to *The Believer*, *The Monthly* and *Griffith Review*. His first novel, *The Adversary*, will be published in 2020. His current research projects include queer histories in and of the novel, Australian comics since 1980, and new forms of nonfiction.



# Writer-researcher- facilitator

An integrative model for creative writers working  
in wellbeing contexts and beyond

Megan Hayes and Sophie Nicholls

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we introduce an integrative model for working as a creative writer-researcher-facilitator (W-R-F). During the process of designing a new MA in Creative Writing and Wellbeing, we realized that we wanted to re-examine the complex interrelationships between the different strands of our work, in order to provide a framework within which our students could explore their own evolving practice. The model that we present here has emerged from this ongoing process of reflection and conversation in relation to our own practice, and was subsequently developed collaboratively with a group of practitioners working in the context of writing and wellbeing. We have found that creative exploration of these three interdependent aspects of our own lives—writing-researching-facilitating—can help us to recognize practical ways in which to integrate them into a more cohesive whole. We believe that this model also suggests ways for writer-researcher-facilitators to support one another in sharing best practice and in advancing developments in the field. We hope to begin a further conversation that will be immediately applicable to those working in the area of writing and wellbeing, but also to anyone negotiating the challenges, tensions and creative synergies inherent to living as a writer in the world.



## Introduction

*“But can I really call my creative writing ‘research’?”  
“I’m not a researcher, although I do know about  
running writing workshops...”  
“I’m not an academic, so I can’t call myself a  
researcher.”*

These are some of the thoughts that we frequently hear writers voice when we talk to them about their practice. We believe that writing, researching and facilitating are key processes with which most writers regularly engage in some way. However, for many writers the relationship between these processes feels problematic, unresolved or perhaps even full of tension.

Many writers may see their primary and most important activity as the writing itself, even if they are unable to engage in this process on a full-time basis, and whether or not they would label this as practice-based research. Increasingly, writers are asked to facilitate writing: namely, the crafting, telling and sharing processes of others in settings as diverse as schools, libraries, universities, literary festivals, hospices, care homes, community groups and the professional development departments of corporate organizations. This work, too, might feed directly into a writer’s research aims. Or, it might not. If we consider research in its simplest terms—an investigation with the aim to reach a new conclusion—then it is clear that both writing and facilitating are valid forms of research, separately or in combination.

Sometimes, then, this relationship between writing, research and facilitating can feel highly creative and productive: for example, when our writing practice informs and enriches our pedagogical approach to workshops; or when facilitation becomes a process of action research, which in turn contributes to the shaping of the discipline. However, these tasks can also feel as if they are in direct and unhelpful conflict with one another. The arrangement of our educational institutions and often our job roles themselves can lead to one of these aspects being privileged over another. In some universities, for example, a more traditional conception of research is still privileged over teaching (despite creative outputs being included in the REF) and writers may find themselves arguing for the value of practice-based research outputs—novels, collections of poems, life writing. Creative writers still find themselves

justifying their practice as research or arguing for its value alongside research in other disciplines. Pedagogical research, where writers reflect on their practice of facilitation, is often an under-developed area. In other institutions—schools, for example—the value of teaching writing is privileged over research and/or the teacher’s practice as a writer. It seems that, in the midst of these tensions, many of us do not think of ourselves as researchers at all.

All of this can lead to a misconception of what we believe is the vital and enriching relationship between writing, researching and facilitating. We would go so far as to say that we believe that these processes are fundamental to our wellbeing, being bound up in our personal and professional identities and the way that we understand ourselves.

We have each worked as a writer-researcher-facilitator in the broad field of writing and wellbeing for a good number of years, and yet neither of us necessarily articulated our work in this way until now. It was when we began the design and creation of a new MA Creative Writing and Wellbeing at Teesside University[1] that we found ourselves asking what it is that our students might be doing, how they might currently be working and how best we could equip them for a future that demands many different skills from writers; from the crafting, editing and contextualizing of one’s own work, to critical analysis of this process, to an ability to become reflexive facilitators of this process for and with others. We wanted to design a pathway through the course that would speak to each of these three ways of working from the very first week. We knew that we did not want to wait until the final dissertation module to invite students to see themselves as researchers, but rather to embed this from the beginning through design for active learning. As a result of this process, we devised the W-R-F model that we set out in this paper. We hope that W-R-F offers a way of guiding not only our students but also everyone in our community of practice and inquiry (Lave and Wenger 1998) in developing and integrating each of these identities or “selves.”

### Why do we need models and frameworks?

As the diverse programme at the annual NAWÉ conference demonstrates year upon year, many writers—often those who have used writing in support of their own health and wellbeing—venture

into contexts where the ideas and experiences they have developed may be of support to others. Writers may also be asked to contribute workshops in health and wellbeing contexts, sometimes working with vulnerable groups of people who are ill or dealing with trauma of other kinds. Because of this, attention is now being paid to the ethical implications of such work and the need for safeguarding of both participants and facilitators.

In an article for *Msexia*, the popular magazine for writers, Carolyn Jess-Cooke (2017: 52-53) interviewed a number of facilitators and participants of creative writing workshops in wellbeing contexts. She calls for research and “further dialogue about safeguarding—which protects, prepares and professionalizes the work,” whilst noting that there is an urgent need to take into account what she perceives as the “crossovers between writing-as-art and writing-as-therapy.”

We would agree that—whether or not we explicitly enter into a health and wellbeing context, or conceive of ourselves as working in the field of “writing and wellbeing”—the impetus of our students and participants (and ourselves) to write from deeply felt personal experience makes any writing workshop a space in which difficult subject matter may inevitably arise and need to be negotiated. All of this suggests that there is a growing necessity to think through our own relationship between writing and facilitating, and how the knowledge we gain from this reflection might be helpful in sharing and defining best practice, in safeguarding others and ourselves and in furthering the evidence base for creative writing and wellbeing in the longer term.

The work that we do in writing and wellbeing also needs to be situated within the wider context of growing research around the benefits of arts in health. As Daisy Fancourt (2017: ix) writes, “the use of arts in health has blossomed. What, for many centuries, was seen as a fringe activity is now being recognized as a field that has enormous impact on both individuals and societies.” Nevertheless, as Fancourt adds, “despite this surge in interest and activity, there is still limited support available for people working in the field.” We need to find ways to support people working using writing across what is a very wide range of settings.

From a pragmatic perspective, we need to evaluate and capture the work we do in order to fund and

sustain it, and to advance our knowledge. As Stephen Clift (2012: 121) writes, we know that “the arts can and do have a role to play in enhancing well-being and quality of life, even in the most disadvantaged of environments” yet it is increasingly the case that “robust evidence [is] central to any effort to translate promising demonstration projects into sustained programmes of work through commissioning by the public sector.” If we wish to promote writing in wellbeing contexts, we need to gather a richer evidence base for what we know can be profound, transformative and valuable work.

The Paper Nations Benchmark (Soyinka and Sweetman 2018) sets out a number of “good practice principles in writer development” for the “emerging” and “continuing” writer, as well as the “writer-facilitator”. In this benchmark, “writer-facilitator” connotes “experienced or published writers who are looking for guidance in the practice of supporting developing writers”, and who may be working in “different professional contexts and modes, for example as teachers, freelance tutors, workshop leaders, editors or agents” (Soyinka and Sweetman 2018: iv-v). Our model thus provides a further branch to this important and useful discussion by incorporating the ways in which writer-facilitators also work as researchers. We would like to extend the discussion begun by Paper Nations around the “good practice principles” of facilitating writing, to address the ways in which writer-facilitators might specifically work in wellbeing contexts—their own and that of others—perhaps in healthcare and community settings. In doing so, we advocate for the many ways in which a critical-reflective research perspective can (and often should) be adopted in these settings. We envisage this as a first step in strengthening the support available to those taking the literary arts into health settings, and also a way to capture and evaluate the commendable work being done in this area as practice-based research. Perhaps we need a similar benchmark that aims to look at work within the specific settings of writing and wellbeing.

The importance of the relationship between research and facilitation is underlined when we consider the ways in which the nature of education continues to transform—particularly in response to the new challenges of employability in a fluid and uncertain world. As John Seely Brown (2002: 68) attests: “Contrary to popular assumptions that as people delve further into an academic field, they simply

become more theoretical, the reality of graduate education today is that practice, not theory, is at the top of the pyramid". We believe that, in order to equip writers with skills for "lifelong and lifewide learning" (Redecker 2014: 6) we need to find ways of supporting people to reflect on the practices and processes of their writing and facilitation—the doing of writing—and to bring to this understanding a critical-creative rigour. Every writer has a valuable contribution to make to the knowledge base that underpins our advancing field.

### **The W-R-F model in practice**

As we have already noted, the W-R-F model first emerged out of our efforts to support students of the MA Creative Writing and Wellbeing. We wanted to encourage these postgraduate students to adopt the critical-reflective identity of researcher early on in their studies. However, in embedding this model into the initial module of the course, Megan quickly found that she herself felt galvanized by this concept. As is the case for many writers, her work had often felt far from cohesive. Yet, when viewing the various strands of this work through the integrative W-R-F model, she recognized greater integration than she had previously acknowledged. A specific example of this occurred in the design and facilitation of a creative journal-writing workshop for an audience at Chipping Norton Literary Festival (Hayes 2019a).

In the workshop, Megan guided participants through a series of creative and expressive writing prompts. These prompts challenged—overtly and discreetly—the boundaries between creative and more personally reflective forms of writing. Thus, this instance of facilitation was drawn from and synthesized Megan's ongoing interdisciplinary research (Hayes 2015 and Hayes 2019b) and public-facing commercial non-fiction writing (Hayes 2018). Moreover, the W-R-F model enabled Megan to recognize another key area of synergy: the potential to capture the subjective experiences of workshop participants as a research activity in itself. Creative writing pedagogies and processes provide us with powerful ways to evaluate our research. Creative writing can therefore be the method of the research activity as well as a means of evaluating it. This opens up a range of innovative ways for each of us to evidence and communicate the value of what we do with a wider audience.

Fiction writer Nellie Hermann (2016) reflects on her experiences of working as a tutor on the programme in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University. She

describes the journey she has made over the years from standard evaluation questionnaires — What did you enjoy? What did you not enjoy? What did you learn? — to the use of tailor-made creative assignments at the end of each course. She now asks students to apply the learning they gain on her course to "a real medical school experience, preferably a patient encounter" (Hermann 2016: 234). For example, a medical student might take a fiction course then write a fictional account of a real-life encounter with a patient. Hermann believes that these pieces of creative work

...show us, they enact for us in a way that no mere check-box evaluation can, the ways that the creative work is operating on the students: creative pathways are being opened and being used, not in order to take them far away from medicine... but to help them to explore and reflect on their daily lives and what they are learning. These creative activities invite the students to engage and think in multiple directions about the work they are beginning to practice; they perhaps invite them to modes of interrogation that they may not yet have in their arsenal (Hermann 2016: 237).

Thus, students' creative work yields important information for their tutor about what they have learned in their ongoing development as reflexive practitioners.

The value of creative work as evaluation was confirmed for Sophie in the early stages of her work with a group of ophthalmic surgeons carrying out high-risk surgeries in a large NHS Trust. The aim of the project is to provide surgeons with creative writing tools and resources to help them to explore their lives in helpful ways. Together, the project group aims to discover whether creative writing can support surgeons, helping them to develop self-care strategies and to build resilience.

Although detailed end-of-session questionnaires completed by participants after an early workshop did yield some helpful information about what participants had valued most about the experience of writing, perhaps the most important data on the benefits of writing to the surgeons was captured in a collaborative poem that participants produced together during the workshop. The poem itself has become a touchstone for the ongoing work of the group, and a constant reminder of what motivated the group members to seek ways to

nurture themselves and to stay connected with their emotions and those of patients and their families. The content of the poem also provided Sophie with a useful form of feedback about what the group had found helpful and the progress being made, enabling her to plan for the next session. It provided a level of detail that the end-of-session questionnaire could not, in the form of metaphor, symbol and deep reflection. [2]

In a conference presentation, Fiona Sampson (2000) has previously offered practical examples of evaluation methods that “make explicit the central importance of the personal and creative character of the activity they examine; and of the experiences of participants in their own words.” Sampson’s list of methods included participants’ individual narratives of the project (written retrospectively) as well as ongoing reflections in project journals, and participants’ own writing, sometimes with the help of an enabling writer. We would add to this the value of reflections by the writer-facilitator on the research process.

In her own practice, Sophie has found that writing both creatively and critically about her experiences of facilitating workshops can be a useful way of gaining insight into them. This is a key part of reflexive practice and has become commonplace in many healthcare trainings. It is also a helpful way of noticing any uncomfortable feelings that might surface for us as facilitators. Therefore, it can be a way of helping to maintain our own wellbeing, especially if there are also opportunities to bring our reflective writing to supervision.

The examples we have discussed here each lend weight to the idea of framing our writing (W) and facilitating (F) as ongoing research (R). We hope these examples also illustrate how we are working with the W-R-F framework in order to evaluate the benefits of writing in a number of ways:

- honouring the role of the emerging writer-selves of others in the research process;
- actively investigating our own roles as writers and writer-facilitators in the research process, and, finally, examining the ways in which our writer-selves and those of others interact in the research process.

Through sharing the W-R-F model we hope to encourage a view of practice as practice-based research, and beyond this to find strategies for

gathering this research and working collaboratively to inform an evidence-based practice.

We do not anticipate that everyone who writes and facilitates, whether in wellbeing contexts or otherwise, wishes to be redefined as a researcher. Rather, we advocate for fluidity between research and practice. We encourage anyone with a passion for—and/or active practice within—the field to recognize the work they already do as valid research, where they don’t already.

### **The W-R-F Model**

As we attempt to draw all of these ideas together, we offer here our nascent model, which we hope might be helpful to those working in writing for wellbeing contexts to begin to capture—or further develop the ways in which they already capture—their explorations and practice.

The large circles in Figure 1 are titled with the principal areas in which an individual might be working. The smaller circles could represent other related roles or projects, personal or professional, of varying size and scope that may feed into one’s role as a writer-researcher-facilitator to a greater or lesser degree. The W-R-F model is deliberately broad in scope given that we are aware of how diverse the careers of writers may be—in wellbeing contexts or otherwise, and within the academy, as well as beyond it.

The W-R-F model is experiential in its approach. We are influenced in our thinking by Kolb who drew on models of learning by Piaget and Freire to suggest that “learning is by its very nature a tension and conflict-filled process” (1984: 41) in which different parts of ourselves are brought into confrontation; according to Kolb, “To learn is not the special province of a single, specialized realm of human functioning such as cognition or perception. It involves the integrated functioning of the total organism - thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving.” Learning emerges, Kolb writes, “as a function of dialectic tensions between basic modes of relating to the world” (1984: 43).

It is this “integrated functioning” of writing, facilitating and researching that we seek to develop in our own practice, in the practice of our students and in the wider community of people with whom we are in dialogue. Kolb’s emphasis on the holistic nature of learning provides us with a way of synthesizing the approaches and processes—both macro and micro—

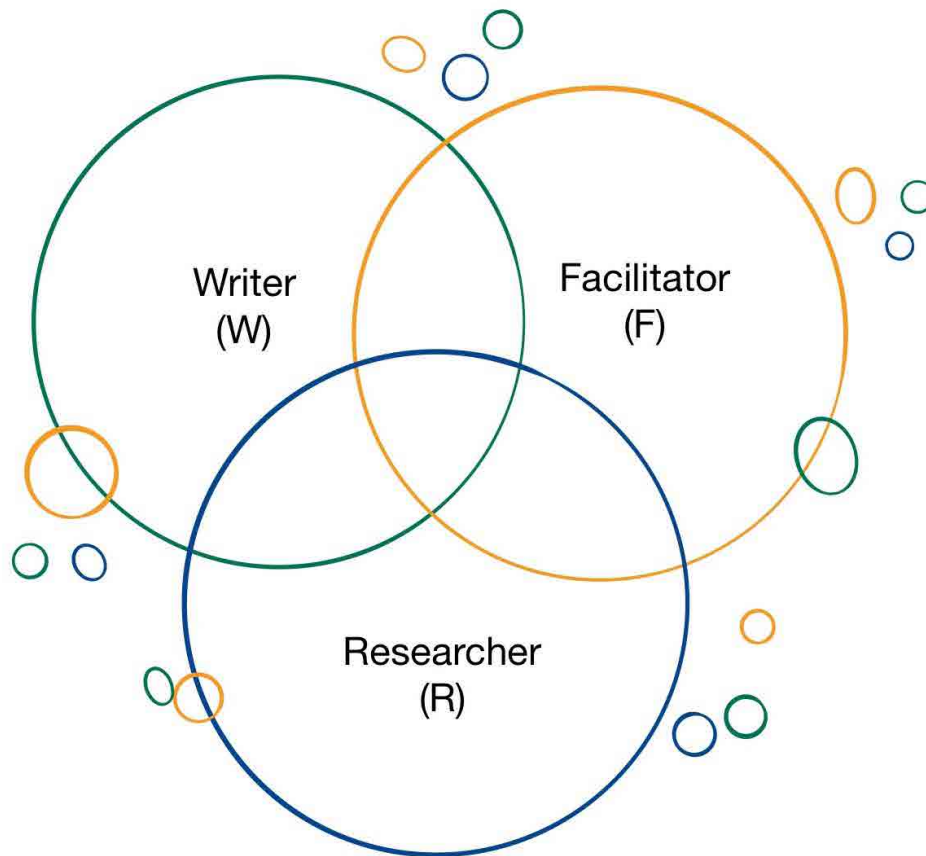


Figure 1: The W-R-F Model

involved in working across the W-R-F domains, as well as within them. It helps us to characterize the fluid movements between W, R and F, and to conceive of writing and facilitating as research, and facilitating (or teaching) as an activity that is as creative and productive as that of writing.

We would also like to suggest that the W-R-F model is a helpful tool for the development of what Redecker, reflecting upon her major foresight study on the future of learning for the European Union (Redecker et al 2011), describes as “lifewide and lifelong learning” (2014: 6). Responding to the challenge of “lifewide” learning, Jackson argues for the importance of tools that “enhance self-awareness” and “attitudes that view life experiences as opportunities for learning and development” (2014: 2).

W-R-F also supports an “ecological” view of learning, which “goes beyond the conception of learning that can be organized through containment and recognizes that it is both personally and socially

situated across and through life’s experience” (Middleton 2018: 28).

In suggesting this model, we do not set out to limit or “flatten” the rich variety of current practice but to further understand, enable and expand it. Where the model does not prove useful, it must, of course, be adapted or even abandoned. The feeling of one’s practice is highly personal. Therefore, we aim to help people to honour and find helpful frameworks and critical underpinnings for this felt practice, where necessary making (re)connections between practice and research/ knowledge creation.

### Testing the W-R-F Model

Having established the model, we then sought to “test” its viability and usefulness with practitioners in the field of writing and wellbeing. At the micro level, the purpose of the W-R-F model is to help individuals develop in any area they feel is important for them, fostering a sense of belonging and professionalism in each realm. A given individual

might feel confident as a writer, but less so as a facilitator. Another might feel well-practised in facilitation, but anxious about their creative work, perhaps wishing that they could produce or publish more. Yet another might feel adept at research (practice-based or otherwise) and yet be filled with dread at the idea of facilitation.

At the macro level, we propose this model in an attempt to unify what is already a diverse range of individuals, with a breadth of expertise, working across the broadly defined field of writing and wellbeing and beyond. These individuals may be emerging or established creative practitioners, in relation to the Paper Nations Benchmark (Soyinka and Sweetman 2018), but they might equally be writer-counsellors, writer-therapists, writer-educators or otherwise.

To test this thinking at both the micro and macro level, in February 2019, Sophie ran a workshop as part of a weekend symposium for members of Lapidus International, the UK-based Words for Wellbeing Association. The workshop was entitled ‘What do we mean by research in writing and wellbeing?’ Participants shared a wealth of experience across a range of writing and wellbeing settings, which included: the use of writing for their own personal and professional development and in one-to-one and group work as counsellors and therapists; in end-of-life care, cancer care, and in a range of health care settings; and in many different areas of education.

Sophie began her workshop session by asking participants to free-write for ten minutes around the word “research” and what it meant to them. Participants then discussed this activity in small groups. It was evident that, although many of the participants felt very confident about their application of creative writing techniques and approaches within their sphere of professional expertise, and discussed the nuances of these with enthusiasm, they did not see themselves as researchers. A common phrase voiced at this point, often prefacing observations of great value and insight, was “I’m not an academic but...” When questioned further about this, many of the participants, although highly experienced in running writing workshops and practical hands-on interventions, did not see themselves as doing research. Instead, they viewed research as something that happens in a university setting, carried out by

academics.

Other common fears expressed were that research can lead to “bamboozlement” or that it involved misuse of “power”, a “tendency towards elevation” or “elaborate language that feels exclusionary.” Some participants suggested that new research methods were needed in order to account for practice that is “non-linear” and “open ended.” Some participants shared their own experiences or the experiences of people they knew who had struggled with doctoral research.

It was clear from this discussion that there was a recognition of the value of research when it involves “seeking”, “listening to what’s there”, “enabling others to build on what you have done” and “challenging” or “dismantling” misconceptions; but that many experienced and talented writer-facilitators felt alienated from the idea of research, approached it with mistrust or simply did not think that it was something to which they could contribute. Sophie then introduced the model of writer-researcher-facilitator and asked participants to “map” or draw these three aspects of their practice on large pieces of paper. She gave people the following guidelines:

Take some time to close your eyes and connect with each of these aspects of your practice. Then, when you are ready, select three colours, one for each of writer, researcher, facilitator. Thinking about yourself and your current practice, map out or draw what each of these looks like and feels like for you right now, in whatever way makes sense to you. Think about the shape of these aspects of your practice: the size, texture, any images that come to mind—however vivid or hazy—and the relative space that each takes up for you right now. If you held writer or researcher or facilitator in your hand, how heavy or light would it feel? Is it warm or cool? Does it have a taste, a sound, an outline, perhaps a voice? If it feels right, you can note down any words or associations that come to mind.

Participants engaged enthusiastically with this task for thirty minutes, after which they were then encouraged to share and discuss their experiences. Many found that the exercise revealed to them the area of their practice that currently felt most under-developed. Some participants shared that they had realized what was “blocking” them from doing more

of W, R or F. Many participants shared that they had not previously realized that they could frame their writing or their facilitation of others' writing as research that might be helpful to the field.

In her free writing, one of the participants, Christina, wrote that research was a way of "searching, searching for meaning, grasping, thinking, stumbling, re-searching, searching again, re-examining, exploring, going in circles and wondering what it all means." Through her freewriting she discovered her own fear of this process: "What if it all grows too big?" But by the end of the writing, she arrived at a new understanding: "We find a way in the calm, after the expulsion and growth and chaos and fear to stand and be, to take new breath and see the simplicity of life, reconnecting, re-searching, finding a new way of being."

When Christina shared this with her group, they were inspired to research the origins of the word "research," using Google on their phones to discover the etymological links with the Old French *rechercher*, meaning to go about seeking. Christina noted the resonance for her of this idea of seeking or searching after something.

In her sketching of the three aspects of her practice, she drew three closely intertwined lines to represent writing, researching and facilitating, noting that writing and researching feels as if it might be 'running away' and that it 'needs to overlap' with her facilitation work.

Once participants had sketched out their feelings around W-R-F and discussed them with one another, Sophie asked them to use the insights they had gained to make action plans of what they needed to do next, in order to develop, nurture or bring into balance particular areas.

Some weeks later, when reflecting on her freewriting and drawing during the workshop, Christina wrote:

On reflection the invitation to acknowledge the three different parts of self has been enlightening, giving a sense of permission for the researcher self to be allowed to be part of the creative process rather than stark and separate. Seeing the visual especially intertwined with writer and facilitator has brought an understanding about the relationship between the three, and a confidence in my practice which has been

useful to return to when thinking about myself and my work in a reflexive way.

Helen Sword's work on academic writing (2017) offers a useful parallel to this process. Sword identifies four "cornerstones" of a flourishing writing practice: behavioural habits of discipline and persistence (B); artisanal habits of craftsmanship and care (A); social habits of collegiality and collaboration (S); and emotional habits of positivity and pleasure (E). This BASE provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay of four aspects of writing in order that we might become more productive and fulfilled. At her accompanying website, [writersdiet.com](http://writersdiet.com), Sword offers a playful space where we are invited to move four coloured dots on a relational diagram, producing a profile of where we might need to develop our habits and skills. Sophie has found this tool invaluable in revealing how solitary and isolated she had become in her own writing habits. By focusing on doing more social writing (S) she produced a collaborative paper on writing and walking (Nicholls and Trofimova 2018) and she is now writing this paper with Megan.

With our own W-R-F model, we hope to take a similar approach, encouraging others to use playful tools to identify where they might most enjoy focusing their strategic efforts, in order to bring to light and develop the otherwise overlooked aspects of their writer-facilitator-researcher selves.

### **Using the W-R-F Model: A tool for reflexive practice**

Below we offer a table of first questions, or reflective writing prompts, which we envisage might be useful to those interested in integrating their work in the ways that we have outlined.

### Reflective Questions for the Writer-Researcher-Facilitator (W-R-F)

<i>Writer Self</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do I <i>feel</i> as a writer? What does writing feel like?</li> <li>• What do I want my writing to do in the world? What are my hopes and aims for my writing?</li> <li>• Do I want to share my writing in some way?</li> </ul>
<i>Writer-Facilitator Self</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does it <i>feel</i> to be a facilitator?</li> <li>• How do I support the creative aims and developing writer-selves of others?</li> <li>• What are the ethical considerations around my work? How do I keep myself safe and others safe?</li> </ul>
<i>Researcher Self</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does the idea of research <i>feel like</i> for me?</li> <li>• How do I capture and evaluate my practice as a writer-facilitator?</li> <li>• What might be helpful about what I do for others' and their ways of working? How could the work of others—creative and critical theory, ideas, frameworks—support or challenge what I am doing?</li> </ul>
<b>Integrating my work as a Writer-Researcher-Facilitator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which areas feel under-developed or take up the least space in my life? Where do I long to focus or grow further? What aspects do I need to nurture in myself and my life?</li> <li>• Which areas take up the most space in my life? Is this OK?</li> <li>• Can I map this out visually on paper in some way?</li> <li>• Are there any conflicts? Synergies? Potential to benefit from this overlap, for myself or for those with whom I work?</li> <li>• What else do I notice in bringing these selves together?</li> </ul>

We suggest an active learning approach to the use of this tool. For example, it may be helpful to approach the W-R-F mapping process through doodling and drawing, as in the example described above. Our early testing suggests that this playful, intuitive and creative approach can help people to tune in to the three aspects of the model.

You may choose to approach this tool by working on your own or with others. Here are some suggestions that you might like to explore:

- Use a whiteboard wall. Each participant takes an area of the same whiteboard wall to do their mapping and then stands back and compares it with the mapping of others. This can be helpful for promoting conversation and discussion around similarities and divergences.
- Use large pieces of paper and coloured post-it-notes that can be easily moved around as participants think through their relationship with the three domains.
- Use playdough, plasticine and construction straws to help participants to create 3-D models of how each of the domains feel.
- Use the floor and have participants 'pace

out' or embody the mapping of each of the domains in space or do large-scale diagramming and doodling.

As we refine the model and its application, we would welcome feedback. As a next step, we are exploring the ways in which the W-R-F model might be useful for our PhD students, particularly as they negotiate the creative and critical elements of their work, and so we would be particularly interested in hearing if the model proves useful in this context.

### Conclusion

This paper has outlined how—when designing a learning journey through the complexly intertwined domains of writing, researching and facilitating—we unexpectedly devised an integrative model to articulate this hybrid mode of working, drawing upon our own practical experience. We then took this model to a collaborative workshop with Lapidus International members for further discussion and refinement. The practitioner participants at this workshop welcomed the W-R-F model as a way



to acknowledge and integrate work already being conducted. They also noted that it provided a pragmatic tool, encouraging reflexivity and strategic planning for self-development in key areas. From this workshop we have distilled some reflective exercises to accompany our model, which we hope are of use to others.

As our work with W-R-F model develops, we continue to think about potential adaptations that may be helpful for writers working within the academy and beyond. This is a key future direction for our inquiry and we would welcome responses from writers outside of the academy who feel they might usefully apply and/or adapt this model to their specific ways of working. In particular, we are interested in further exploring how the model might support Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for writers.

It is our hope that the W-R-F model will serve as a way for many more of us to recognize and celebrate the holistic nature of our work and—where we don't already—to understand ourselves as active

researchers. We believe the model can offer a firmer sense of identity for those of us working in the area of writing and wellbeing—but also for those working outside of this across the three realms of practice—by offering a means of understanding this work in an integrated manner. In integrating our work into a holistic model at the individual level, we hope that this may encourage increasing integration at the collective level, and thus further research and promote best practice in writing and wellbeing, and beyond.

### **Acknowledgements:**

We would like to thank the participants of the Lapidus workshop in Newcastle on 24 March 2019 and in particular Christina Wilson, who so generously gave permission for us to describe her process and include her reflections in this paper.

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### **Notes**

1. This course was launched in September 2019. Through a process of formal and informal consultation with writers based in a number of fields including members of both NAWE and Lapidus, we identified a demand for a programme that would equip students with the critical-reflective skills to write, research and facilitate writing in wellbeing contexts. We set out to foreground the importance of creative process as well as product and to enable students to investigate and further develop best practice in this emerging field.
2. The workshop described is part of a larger ongoing research project, which uses narrative inquiry as a means of examining the potential benefits of creative writing as a strategy for alleviating stress in a group of surgeons working in a 'high-stakes' area of surgery. Though we would not suggest that creative writing itself is the only means of evaluation used in this context, it has yielded some very useful data in combination with other qualitative methods.

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# From Folktale to Fantasy

## A Recipe-Based Approach to Creative Writing

Michael Fox

### ABSTRACT

In an environment of increasing strategies for creative writing “lessons” with varying degrees of constraints – ideas like the writing prompt, flash fiction, and “uncreative” writing – one overlooked idea is to work with folktale types and motifs in order to create a story outline. This article sketches how such a lesson might be constructed, beginning with the selection of a tale type for the broad arc of the story, then moving to the range of individual motifs which might be available to populate that arc. Advanced students might further consider using the parallel and chiastic structures of folktale to sophisticate their outline. The example used here – and suggested for use – is a folktale which informs both *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* and which, therefore, is likely at least to a certain extent to be familiar to many writers. Even if the outline which this exercise generates were never used to write a full story, the process remains useful in thinking about the building blocks of story and traditional structures such as the archetypal “Hero’s Journey.”

## Introduction

I teach on the Writing side of a Department of English and Writing Studies. I trained as a medievalist, but circumstances led me to a unit which teaches a range of courses from introductory creative writing to professional communication and rhetoric. In the fall of 2013, the local public school board contacted several departments in our faculty, asking if we would be interested in putting together some kind of programming for students in their Grade Five gifted itinerant program. I was put forward as the contact person, and we devised a set of seminars for a day-long event we called “Language Day.” I decided to talk about Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, a work I could expect a few of them to know, and to talk about *The Hobbit* as a retelling of a folktale. In conducting this workshop over consecutive years, I discovered that the idea of a folktale “recipe” as a starting point for creative writing, at least as a small-scale lesson, was something that worked for the students, many of whom were reading books which would be considered fantasy (however one would define that difficult term). In subsequent years, a sophisticated version of this lesson was used in a graduate English course (with a creative option for the final project) and, most recently, as a full half-course in creative writing at the undergraduate level.[1] The lessons learned, in terms of motifs and structure, should be valuable to (creative) writers in any genre.

I borrow the adjective “recipe-based” from Kenneth Goldsmith, though he uses the term while discussing the “recipe-based art” of Sol LeWitt. Goldsmith’s description of LeWitt’s method is instructive: “Like shopping for ingredients and then cooking a meal, [LeWitt] says that all the decisions for making an artwork should be made beforehand and that the actual execution of the work is merely a matter of duty, an action that shouldn’t require too much thought, improvisation, or even general feeling” (2011: 128-9). Unlike a recipe for food, however, which tends to turn out fairly similar fare, these recipes and propositions in fact generate distinctive final products, even if multiple versions of Goldsmith’s *Day* (his retyping of an edition of the *New York Times*) would probably not interest many readers.[2] This writing exercise is obviously very different from what LeWitt and Goldsmith are advocating (and does not encourage or facilitate disengaged execution), but the analogy of a recipe remains useful.

If the terms “motif” and “folktale” are unfamiliar, I am working with the following definitions: a motif, in terms of folklore, is “the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition. In order to have this power, it must have something unusual and striking about it” (Thompson 1977: 415). Generally, motifs are figures, items, or events. Motif indices, efforts to gather and classify motifs, ought to be tools a writer has at hand. The classic motif index is that of Stith Thompson, but there are excellent smaller indices focused on specific areas (see, for example, Boberg 1966 and Cross 1952). While motifs may appear in multiple unrelated stories, a tale-type index assumes that all the different versions of one tale type have “some kind of genetic relationship” (Thompson 1977: 416). In terms of folktale, then, a tale consists of a broad set of motifs, usually in a certain sequence, which has various realizations which are more and less true to the underlying type. In linguistic terms, one might think of the tale type as a kind of deep structure and the individual tales as different surface structures.

## Context

Approaching creative writing with a model or recipe is not a new idea. In fact, attempts to communicate the essence of story have been around since at least Aristotle, who stated in his *Poetics* that “tragedy is mimesis of an action that is complete, whole, and of magnitude [...] A whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end” (Halliwell 2014: 55). In a traditional three-act structure, beginning, middle, and end correspond to certain kinds of action, usually described with words like *situation*, *complication*, and *resolution*, though Joseph Campbell’s *departure* (or *separation*), *initiation*, and *return* is really the same kind of structure (Campbell 1968: 49-243). As early as Horace, that structure had been modified to five acts, and most students of creative writing will be familiar with Freytag’s pyramid (five acts) and contemporary reworkings of the pyramid in well-known texts such as that in Janet Burroway’s *Writing Fiction* (2019: 134-41), itself an influence on Stone and Nyren’s seven-act model, which includes *ground situation*; *complication* or *inception*; *rising action*; *crisis*; *climax*; *falling action*; and *resolution* or *denouement* (Stone and Nyren 2005: 72-4). The most detailed model of this type, though developed for screenwriting, is Blake Snyder’s “beat sheet.” Snyder takes a three-act structure and turns it into fifteen beats, including with each beat the rough length of the section. Where earlier

structural models, however, hint almost not at all at the content of each act, Snyder's beat sheet affords glimpses of the sort of story it might underpin: *opening image; theme stated; set-up; catalyst; debate; break into two; B story; fun and games; midpoint; bad guys close in; all is lost; dark night of the soul; break into three; finale; final image* (Snyder 2005: 70).

Another approach to distilling the essence of story, though impossible to differentiate completely from the structural model, relates to the reduction of story to types. Some of these reductions are very familiar: there are only two stories (*someone went on a journey and a stranger came to town*; a widespread remark that may have begun with John Gardner; Burroway 2014: 167) or perhaps three (*man against man, man against nature, and man against himself*; Wilbur 2001: 65-85). Less well known are the "seven basic plots" of Christopher Booker (2004) and Blake Snyder's belief that all screenplays fall into ten types: *monster in the house; golden fleece; out of the bottle; dude with a problem; rites of passage; buddy love; whydunit; the fool triumphant; institutionalized; and superhero* (Snyder 2005: 26-41).

Other instructional guides, like Snyder's, also blend structural models and catalogues of story types. Ronald B. Tobias, for example, offers 20 "master plots," but for each plot shows how it must belong to one of only two types – "plots of the body" or "plots of the mind" (1993: 43) – all while generally adhering to variations of a three-act structure (particularly relevant here is the "Quest Plot," Tobias 1993: 71-84). Tobias comments that "each plot is different, but each has its roots in a pattern" and links those patterns to human behaviour: "These patterns are so basic to being human that they haven't changed in the last five thousand years" (Tobias 1993: 9-11).[3] John Truby takes a slightly different approach, suggesting that Aristotelian terms and three-act structure are not useful (Truby 2007: 3) and that plot is organic; in other words, plot must develop in a process from a story idea. Truby does list six plot types (2007: 260-66), but his focus is on "steps" of story structure. Truby offers seven key steps and 22 steps overall, but warns that the steps are not a formula, acting instead as the scaffolding which ensures the successful unfolding of the organic plot (2007: 39-40, 268). The steps work because they are part of a process that, as for Tobias, comes from human behaviour: "All stories are a form of communication that expresses the dramatic code," and Truby defines that code as "an artistic description of how a person can grow

or evolve," which is "embedded deep in the human psyche" (2007: 7).

At the same time as Tobias and Truby are suggesting a way to reduce story to a pattern or patterns of behaviour, other arguments for just one story-type are, at least on the surface, slightly less abstract, and clearly connect to the realm of myth and folktale. Here, we must recognize the work of Otto Rank and Lord Raglan, both of whom extracted a foundational heroic pattern from what might best be called myth (the Rank-Raglan "mythotype" has 22 points, from *the hero's mother as royal virgin to the hero's tombs* – see, for example, Hall 1989: 74-6). More widely known is the "monomyth" of Joseph Campbell, in which he describes the 17 plot points which are usually part of myth (using his *separation, initiation, and return* as the three acts into which the plot points fall). Though Campbell does not feature prominently in many writing textbooks, Christopher Vogler uses Campbell exclusively in developing a "mythic structure for writers." Vogler states that Campbell "exposed for the first time the pattern that lies behind every story ever told" (2007: 4), and that pattern is as follows:

1. Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD, where
2. they receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE.
3. They are RELUCTANT at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but
4. are encouraged by a MENTOR to
5. CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD and enter the Special World, where
6. they encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.
7. They APPROACH THE INMOST CAVE, crossing a second threshold
8. where they endure the ORDEAL.
9. They take possession of the REWARD and
10. are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the Ordinary World.
11. They cross the third threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and are transformed by the experience.
12. They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World. (Vogler 2007: 19)

In response to indices of motifs and tale-types, Vladimir Propp (1968) also developed a morphology of the folktale which includes seven *dramatis personae* and thirty-one different functions:

effectively, though each tale need not include every function (and indeed many include only a few), Propp demonstrated that all stories in what he called the “fairy tale” category of folktale had the same possible range of functions in the same order. The functions would be fulfilled by the *dramatis personae*, characters and things which can vary wildly while the basic function – for example, “the provision or receipt of a magical agent”; Function XIV – remains the same in all tales which include it. Propp’s morphology also placed function in categories which designate the arc of the story: *initial situation, preparatory section, complication, donors, entry of the helper to the end of the first move, beginning of the second move, and continuation of the second move*. Propp’s model was criticized for not being sufficiently abstract, though lauded for its recognition of the possibilities in reducing “a wealth of empirical or surface narrative events to a much smaller number of abstract or ‘deep-structural’ moments” (Jameson 1981: 120). A.J. Greimas takes Propp’s spheres of action and functions and reduces them to six *actants* (Subject and Object; Sender and Receiver; Helper and Opponent), which are basically “bundle[s] of functions” (Greimas 1983: 218) that can be “manifested in discourse by several actors,” just as one actor can “constitute a syncretism of several actants” (Greimas 1987: 107). The relationship of the actants can be diagrammed, and the relationships between pairs (the “semantic investment[s]”) are “desire,” “knowledge,” and “power,” respectively. What Greimas is working out is a sophisticated grammar of narrative, a system that is significantly more abstract than Propp’s and that demonstrates even more clearly how discussions of story structures and types is very much a part of traditional structuralist concerns from Lévi-Strauss onward.

While the approaches listed here have much to offer in understanding of the essence of story, and, indeed, if the structuralist project were extended, to an understanding also of how story is told, their utility in the creative writing classroom is limited. The model I am proposing adopts a specific number of movements (or acts) and a range of motifs from a particular folktale type, thus avoiding an overly abstract or general set of instructions. This model thus incorporates both structural and typological classifications of story in a manner that can be scaled to the level of the students being taught. One benefit of using the particular tale I have chosen is that Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* is a full realization of precisely this model. So far as I have been able to discover, this

particular approach has not been explored as a tool for teaching creative writing.

### The Lesson: I. Content

The best known and most widely available folktale type index is that of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson (*The Types of the Folktale* 1961) (AT numbers), though Hans-Jörg Uther has issued a more up-to-date index (*The Types of International Folktales* 2004) (ATU numbers). This lesson could be developed with any tale type in Aarne and Thompson, but I have taught this lesson with ATU 301 (known as “The Three Kidnapped [Stolen] Princesses”) because it has a full set of movements (or acts) and a rich range of possible motifs (or content). Using ATU 510 (the basis for Cinderella) or ATU 333 (“The Glutton”; the basis for Little Red Riding Hood) would work just as well. ATU 301 consists of six movements: the hero [4] (by which is meant the particular characteristics of the hero of this type of tale), the descent, stolen maidens, rescue, betrayal of the hero, and recognition. Within these six features are further details of possible plot elements, here quoted precisely from Aarne and Thompson:

I. *The Hero* is of supernatural origin and strength: (a) son of a bear who has stolen his mother; (b) of a dwarf or robber from whom the boy rescues himself and his mother; (c) the son of a man and a she-bear or (d) cow; (e) engendered by the eating of fruit, (f) by the wind or (g) from a burning piece of wood. (h) He grows supernaturally strong and is unruly.

II. *The Descent*. (a) With two extraordinary companions (b) he comes to a house in the woods, or (b<sup>1</sup>) a bridge; the monster who owns it punishes the companions but is defeated by the hero, (c) who is let down through a well into a lower world. Alternative beginning of the tale: (d) the third prince, where his elder brothers have failed, (e) overcomes at night the monster who steals from the king’s apple tree, and (f) follows him through a hole into the lower world.

III. *Stolen Maidens*. (a) Three princesses are stolen by a monster. (b) The hero goes to rescue them.

IV. *Rescue*. (a) In the lower world, with a sword which he finds there, he conquers several monsters and rescues three maidens. (b) The maidens are pulled up by the hero’s companions

and stolen.

V. *Betrayal of Hero*. (a) He himself is left below by his treacherous companions, but he reaches the upper world through the help of (b) a spirit whose ear he bites to get magic power to fly or (c) a bird, (d) to whom he feeds his own flesh; or (e) he is pulled up.

VI. *Recognition*. (a) He is recognized by the princesses when he arrives on the wedding day. (b) He is in disguise and (c) sends his dogs to steal from the wedding feast; or (d) he presents rings, (e) clothing, or (f) other tokens, secures the punishment of the impostors and marries one of the princesses. (Aarne and Thompson 1961: 90-1)

For each of these movements, the tale-type index includes a list of possible motifs, a list which sketches a broad range of possible variations in the tale.[5] That list can (and probably should) be supplemented by consulting Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* and looking up the motifs listed in Aarne and Thompson (as one can then add closely related motifs which might not appear in extant versions of the tale).[6]

In a short workshop-style lesson, students can begin by listing the familiar elements of Tolkien's

story. Which characters do they remember? What, further, are the major plot points of the story? It ought to be possible to discuss features of the hero (Bilbo) and his companions and the nature of their adversaries and to discuss where these might appear in the movements listed above. A one- or two-sentence outline of *The Hobbit* could be generated and compared to Tolkien's reconstruction of ATU 301 in *Sellic Spell*. It should immediately be apparent that kidnapped or stolen maidens have nothing to do with *The Hobbit*, and here students should see that certain movements can be left entirely out of the tale. Even for my youngest audiences, I demonstrated how Tolkien's primary source for *The Hobbit* is *Beowulf*, and *Beowulf* is itself a realization of ATU 301, a type which has many versions, the most intriguing of which are Old Norse-Icelandic prose texts such as *Grettir's Saga*. While the lesson is easier to understand and gains nuance with a knowledge of existing versions of ATU 301 (and longer exposure to the theoretical approaches outlined quickly above), my experience has been that it works for a group of ten-year-olds, about half of whom had some knowledge of Tolkien.

To help them to invent outlines of their own, I provided them with a template (Figure 1) adapted from the six movements listed in Aarne and Thompson to make the tale more familiar:

	Motif 1	Motif 2	Motif 3	Motif 4	Motif 5	Notes
<u>Section I</u> <i>The Hero(ine)</i>						
<u>Section II</u> <i>The Hero(ine)'s Stuff/Qualities</i>						
<u>Section III</u> <i>The Complication</i>						
<u>Section IV</u> <i>The Descent</i>						
<u>Section V</u> <i>The Return</i>						
<u>Section VI</u> <i>Recognition</i>						

**Figure 1.** *The Skeleton Tale (the movements of ATU 301 adapted from Aarne and Thompson)*

I used the motifs from Aarne and Thompson (divided according to movement) and supplemented them with related motifs from Thompson's index. To include all six lists here would take too much space (see Appendix A for a fairly full version), but my technique in this workshop was to have students, template in hand, rotate through six stations (one for each of the sections above), each of which had copies of the motifs for just one of the sections. Key to this process was making sure that no student moved in a linear fashion through the six categories (thus ensuring that none could plan a version of ATU 301 in linear order of sections). Further, as with the folktales themselves, any feature may be omitted (as the "Stolen Maidens" are not part of *Beowulf*, *Grettir's Saga*, or *The Hobbit*). To give an idea of what this might look like, here are some of the motifs from "The Hero(ine)":

L114.1-5: hero of unpromising habits: lazy hero; hero has lain motionless since birth; contest in laziness; spendthrift hero; unruly hero; cheater as hero; hero with disgusting habits

B635.1: human foster-child with animal qualities: the bear's child: human child of man/woman who marries a bear acquires bear characteristics

F611.1: strong person's birth and rearing: child of bear that has stolen one parent; child of person and dwarf; child of person and forest spirit; child of person and robber; child of person and horse; child of person and giant; engendered by the eating of fruit; engendered by the wind; born from an egg; born from a noodle; struck by smith from iron; child of person and troll; child of a sea spirit

F611.3: hero acquires strength: strength from magic object (D1335; D1830); strength from fasting for 12 years and eating nothing except earth; hero practices uprooting trees; jumps across river; beats giant challenger; tests weapons

In choosing motifs, as Propp observes about several of his folktale functions, the motif (or function) can be positive or negative. For example, the hero can react positively or negatively to the actions of the future donor (Function XIII), and/or, depending upon the reaction to the donor, the magical agent

may or may not be transferred (Function XIV) (1968: 42-6). If one considers Bilbo Baggins in light of the above, one sees immediately that Tolkien adopts some motifs (invisibility from a magic object), is careful with some (instead of a bear's son, Bilbo is only slightly odd for potentially having fairy blood in his Took ancestry) and completely inverts others (Bilbo is in no way physically strong; that characteristic and many of the characteristics of the traditional hero of such a tale are given to Beorn). Ultimately, the motifs are suggestions: students should feel free to adopt, adapt, and invent their own motifs within the given structure.

## The Lesson II: Structure (Advanced)

In discussing memorable features of *The Hobbit*, students may have remarked on the cyclical pattern (as the subtitle suggests, "there and back again") of the narrative as a whole and the way the story seems to be punctuated by battles against "monsters." Recent scholarship on *Beowulf* has recognized that the poet uses a repeated "narrative paradigm" in the monster fights, though not all elements are present in each fight (Orchard 2003: 142-3).[7] In other words, the three monster fights of the poem have a parallel structure, and tales of the type ATU 301 often contain multiple internal repetitions of the descent movement of the tale (or further to recognition). In constructing the basic form of a tale, writers should be encouraged to think about parallel sequences of events/motifs. Simple examples which most everyone will know are "The Three Little Pigs" and "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." Though the number need not necessarily be three (in *Grettir's Saga*, it is five), we most commonly see what has been called "The Rule of Three." Christopher Booker finds there are four different manifestations of the rule: "the simple or cumulative three" (each thing much the same); "the progressive or ascending three" (each more important, difficult, or valuable than the last); "the contrasting or double-negative three" (first two are inadequate or wrong); and the "dialectical three" ('the first is wrong in one way, the second in another or opposite way, and only the third, in the middle, is just right') (Booker 2004: 231-2). Propp and Tobias add that trebling can also be attributive ("three heads of a dragon") and can create "character triangles" (Propp 1968: 74; Tobias 1993: 58-66). In other words, all kinds of repetition and variation are possible at different levels of structure.

Both *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*, within sequences



of parallel monster fights, also have larger chiasmic structures. These chiasmic structures, from their first recognition in Homer, have also been known as “ring composition” or “ring structure,” as their inclusion produces what has been called a circular effect, the “there and back again” of Tolkien. A more complex example might be the overall structure of *Beowulf*, which has been laid out most clearly by John D. Niles (1979: 930 [simplified and adapted]):

- A. panegyric for Scyld
- Prologue* B. Scyld’s funeral
- C. history of the Danes before Hroðgar
- D. Hroðgar’s order to build Heorot
- First Fight*
- Interlude*
- Second Fight* (each fight has elements in parallel and chiasmic patterning)
- Interlude*
- Third Fight*
- D. Beowulf’s order to build his barrow
- Epilogue* C. history of the Geats after Beowulf
- B. Beowulf’s funeral
- A. eulogy for Beowulf

In thinking about possible chiasmic structures, note that elements are often antitheses or related only in general ways (a birth can balance a death; an order to build something can be a great hall or a great tomb). In Old Norse-Icelandic versions of ATU 301, the parallel fights lead to change: Grettir is the “hero” at first, but takes the place of the “monster” by the final fight of the saga; in *The Saga of Arrow-Odd*, each of the fights is actually against the same opponent, and the story ends precisely where it began. In *The Hobbit*, of course, the “fights” are very different, culminating in a battle with the dragon that is, at least for Bilbo, purely verbal. In general terms, as R.G. Peterson has pointed out, parallel and chiasmic structures are effects which tend – consciously or subconsciously – to please human expectations of order or which exist “as expressions of [people’s] inclination to use measure and symmetry to organize experience” (1976: 373).[8]

### The Lesson: III. Outcomes

After choosing several motifs for each section of the template, writers should write a brief outline of the story they have generated. The writing of the outline will require adding some connective tissue. Working with this template and the motifs in Appendix A, 10-year-old writers generate outlines such as the following (although these examples do not incorporate the advanced techniques of repetition, parallelism, and chiasmus), and advanced writers generate outlines of incredible depth and complexity:

1. A girl found running with wolves had

disgusting habits. She had a belt she gained through trickery, and the belt could cause illusions. One day, she dropped the belt and had to go back for it, but when she found it, a mist sprang up and she could only follow the sound of a distant drum. The sound led her to an underworld of serpents and their castle where there was lots of treasure. She could only escape by a spider’s thread, but the spider demanded her blood, and she returned home wrapped up in the spider’s web. She was only recognized because the belt buckle stuck out.

2. Once upon a time, there was a boy who was born when a horse ate an apple. He never had a home, and he wouldn’t fight, but he found a ring that protected him against fire. When some malevolent dwarves started kidnapping people, he went to retrieve their souls, accompanied by twin girls. A ferryman took them to a land of rivers of fire and ice, where the boy gathered the souls, but the twins, who couldn’t cross the fire, took the ferry back alone. The boy bent a young tree and shot himself over the water, arriving just as the twins who betrayed him were arranging a funeral for him.
3. There once was a girl with the most promising habits, but she was incredibly weak and so light that the wind would carry her away. Her mother gave her a sword which would fight for her all by itself. One day, she

heard that an ogre was attacking people on a nearby bridge, so she went to confront it. The ogre ran from her, and she followed it through a rock under the bridge. She found there a vault of secrets, but it was guarded by scorpions and scratching cats. Her sword kept them at bay while she took a secret, and she escaped with the help of a strong wind. When she got home, nobody recognized her or the sword, and the ogre went right back to attacking people on the bridge. At least she had that secret.

## Conclusion

Kenneth Goldsmith, arguing for a new approach to writing in the digital age, rephrases Douglas Heubler and remarks that “[t]he world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more” (2011: 1); Christopher Vogler, writing about what he calls “mythic structure,” suggests that one pattern lies behind every story ever told (2007: 4). What Goldsmith is arguing for is “uncreative writing,” a process which might (very generally) be described as reworking existing texts; what Vogler is suggesting is that, in skeletal framework and archetypes, all stories are the same, meaning every writer begins with the same basic structure. Both offer thought-provoking considerations of the process, but both approaches, for different reasons, may not work in the creative writing classroom, either courting issues of plagiarism and appropriation or offering too few constraints to the creative process. However, if Blake Snyder is right that “‘Give me the same thing ... only different’ ... is what story-telling has *always* been about” (Snyder 2005: 44), then what sort of model might find a middle ground?

An approach that in a way combines Goldsmith’s idea of reimagining existing texts and Vogler’s notion of the one story is to use folktale motifs and folktale types as ingredients and models for story structure. Ideally, a writer would have to hand a tale-type index and a motif index, but the materials can easily be provided, as with the example of ATU 301, to create a stand-alone lesson that can be completed in a session of as little as 60 minutes. To enrich the lesson, students could read Tolkien’s *Sellic Spell* and related fairy-tales such as *Dat Erdmänneken* (“The Gnome”; Grimm, Tale 91) or *Der starke Hans* (“Strong John”; Grimm, Tale 166), all tales which directly model the

instructions given here. With more time to evaluate the tale-type, the reading of *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* could be added, full-length works which exhibit much selection, innovation, and sophistication in their execution of the model. Other prose texts of note are the Old Norse-Icelandic *Grettir’s Saga* and *The Saga of Arrow-Odd*, and contemporary novelists such as Patrick DeWitt exploit some of the same basic narrative structures and motifs, as I have shown in a comparison of Tolkien and DeWitt (Fox 2020). The lesson would complement William Quinn’s ideas about using *Beowulf* to teach creative writing (2014) and could resonate with Alison Habens’ Ink:Well project, in which individual lives are mapped onto a “Hero’s Journey” structure (2018), a study which could in turn be used as an entry into a discussion of writing process itself (Burroway 2014: 167; Valeri 2014; Vogler 2007: 293).

Students should, after completing this lesson, at minimum understand the concepts of motif and folktale and have a full outline of a story in hand. Limiting the discussion to motif and folktale, however, obscures the fact that this approach has much in common with theoretical and pedagogical discussions of symbol and archetype. Symbol, first of all, is a difficult term to define, at times functioning as a synonym for motif (where its added meaning is a function, usually, of repetition and intertextual significance) and even as a synonym for archetype. As Janet Burroway defines it, “a symbol is an object or event that, by virtue of association, represents something more or other than itself,” making the whole of the writing process “symbolic” (2019: 193-96). Archetype, in contrast, is a term which enters literary criticism through the writings of C.G. Jung, and which in general suggests that certain characters, functions, and patterns are common to the human experience. Christopher Vogler defines archetypes as “ancient patterns of personality that are the shared heritage of the human race” (2007: 23), and Christopher Booker makes clear that archetypes are relevant at different levels of narrative: the “main archetypal complexes centre around the key roles played by human beings in the ‘archetypal family drama’” and the “patterns shaping stories ... are themselves archetypal” (2004: 707). What Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler, and Christopher Booker are arguing is that certain stories, story-patterns, and characters resonate with Jung’s idea of the “collective unconscious,”[9] and this is substantially similar to what we saw Tobias and Truby argue (above).

The example of ATU 301, therefore, while on the surface an uncomplicated lesson about a folktale type and the possible motifs that might populate it, is also very much entangled with structuralist and psychoanalytic concerns. From a structuralist point of view, the approach might be argued to constrain creativity, but the psychoanalytic aspect of the archetype offers a way for the content of the story to retain meaning. Northrop Frye has been said to have felt that “each generation rewrites the stories of the past in ways that make sense for it, recycling a vast tradition over the ages” (Richter 1989: 644), and the key creative aspect to this exercise is the qualifying remark “in ways that make sense for it.” John Cawelti’s study of what he calls “formula stories” suggests the same thing: “the world of a formula can be described as an archetypal story pattern embodied in the images, symbols, themes, and myths of a particular culture” (1976: 16), and a simple juxtaposition of *The Hobbit* and *Beowulf* makes this point clear.[10] Tolkien’s own study of fairy-stories puts it in different terms: readers and critics can reduce and find common motifs and patterns as much as they want, but in the end “it is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count” (2014a: 39).

Christopher Vogler, finally, stresses both the creativity and flexibility of his process: “The Hero’s Journey is a skeletal framework that should be fleshed out with the details and surprises of the individual journey”; at the same time, “the structure should not call attention to itself, nor should it be followed too precisely” (2007: 19-20; see also Truby 2007: 269). Vogler, however, is working through a one-story model, and his approach is difficult to implement in the creative writing classroom, particularly with younger students. Using a folktale type and its motifs, while a process in which the same principles apply, allows for a lesson that can produce almost immediate results and that is, at the same time, a better entry point than previous guides to a full range of more expansive, more sophisticated, or more theoretical lessons.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank, therefore, the students of the Thames Valley District School Board, the graduate students of English 9142B (Winter 2017), and the creative writers of Writing 4880G (Winter 2019) for their roles in developing

and refining this model.

2. Still, the power of parts of this transcription, presented as poetry, is difficult to deny. See, for example, “Two Poems from ‘The Day’” (Goldsmith 2009).
3. Tobias would seem to have been influenced by Georges Polti, who, in looking mainly at drama, devised thirty-six “dramatic situations” and links them to thirty-six emotions which “encompass all the savor of existence,” “the unceasing ebb and flow which fills human history like tides of the sea, which is, indeed, the very substance of history” (1921:11).
4. The term “hero” here and throughout ought not to be seen as dictating gender, even though traditional examples of the tale have male protagonists. In teaching this lesson (and in the motif lists in Appendix A), I have made that clear.
5. As noted above, Thompson defines a motif as “the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition” (1977: 415), as if a motif were also unchangeable. Propp argues that motifs are not “monomial or indivisible” at all: the smallest indivisible units of the folktale are the functions of the *dramatis personae*. These functions are the “stable, constant elements” of tales, not motifs (1968: 13, 20-1).
6. The final volumes of Thompson’s motif index (6.1 and 6.2) are also very useful, as they include an A-Z index where one can look up, for example, “bat” (the flying mammal) or “door” or “stupid”/“stupidity” and discover where these motifs occur. In effect, it offers another path to tracking motifs: a writer interested only in the “dragon” could work from that entry back to all the motifs in the index, thus finding a much larger range of examples than just those attached to a specific tale type.
7. *Beowulf*’s fight against Grendel and then Grendel’s mother is treated by Orchard as one narrative paradigm, even though the two fights have similar elements (and this is partly based on the two-troll variants of Old Norse-Icelandic versions of the tale). The dragon fight at the end has many other similar elements.
8. For a more in-depth discussion of repetition and how it might function in narrative, see Brooks 1984: 99-101.
9. Blake Snyder also discusses archetypes, though specifically with respect to character (2007: 57-59). For an introduction to the application of Jung to literary study (with discussion specifically of Booker), see Leigh 2011.
10. “Formula” is another difficult term, particularly as it invokes oral-formulaic studies. Theories of formulaic composition are important for the medieval texts mentioned here and could inform this model in useful ways (see Fox 2020a).

## Appendix A: The Six Lists (adapted from Aarne and Thompson)

These lists could be used as they are. However, in situations where students have access to the *Motif Index*, they should be encouraged to look up the motifs in which they are interested. For example, looking at B631 generally would generate a rich list of possibilities for a protagonist's origin from human/animal relationship. Searching around D1076 (the magic ring) offers an amazing range of magic objects.

### Section I: The Hero(ine)

L114.1-5: hero(ine) of unpromising habits: lazy hero(ine) (hero[ine]) has lain motionless since birth; contest in laziness); spendthrift hero(ine); unruly hero(ine); cheater as hero(ine); hero(ine) with disgusting habits

B631: human offspring from marriage to animal

B635.1: human foster-child with animal qualities: the bear's son: human son of woman who marries a bear acquires bear characteristics

F611.1: strong person's birth and rearing: child of bear that has stolen one parent; child of person and dwarf; child of person and forest spirit; child of person and robber; child of person and horse; child of person and giant; engendered by the eating of fruit; engendered by the wind; born from an egg; born from a noodle; struck by smith from iron; child of person and troll; child of a sea spirit

F611.2: strong person's suckling: suckled by animal; suckled by mermaid; suckled by seven mothers; suckled by giant

F611.3: hero(ine) acquires strength: strength from magic object (D1335; D1830); strength from fasting for 12 years and eating nothing except earth; hero(ine) practices uprooting trees; jumps across river; beats giant challenger; tests weapons

F610: remarkably strong person: has strength of "x" number of people; breaks everything he or she touches; must be chained except when in battle; so heavy that no horse can carry the hero(ine) all day

### Section II: The Hero(ine)'s Stuff/Qualities

D810-859: acquisition of magic object: gift, through trickery, found, lost, recovered (many motifs here)

D1335.1-17: object gives magic strength: food; rice/grain; heart of enemy eaten; fighting animals eaten; drink; blood as drink; iron glove; belt; ring; dagger; flask (whatever one drinks from it); bathing in magic cauldron; axe; medicine (charm); song; hammer; staff; apple; garment

D1830-1836: magic strength: by bathing; by touching earth; from helpful animal; from demon; waxing and waning of strength (places; times)

D1076: magic ring: animal recovers lost wishing ring; disenchantment by ring; magic ring tells how another fares; oracular ring; permits owner to learn person's secret thoughts; gives warning; warns of poison; magic ring awakens in the morning; reveals guilt; gives health; renders invulnerable; causes illusion; causes forgetfulness; causes continued sneezing; protects against fire; prevents losing one's way; restores speech; brings good luck

D1081-1097: magic weapons: magic sword (large or small at will; sword turns on owner when untruth is uttered; gives weakness; gives invulnerability; causes magic sleep; cures disease; produces wind, fire, smoke; cuts stone and fells trees; can only be moved by the right person); magic spear (spring breaks forth where magic spear strikes ground; gives omen; warns of danger; gives beauty or ugliness or either at will; spear stuck in river bed stops water; spear speaks); magic arrow (creates island; indicates desired place, path, etc.; locates fish; summons water spirit; sets fire to target; provides ascent to upper world); magic bow; magic cudgel (helps recover magic object; gives victory; attacks by itself); magic battle-axe (stone axe conquers enemies)

### Section III: The Complication

G475-478: ogre attacks intruders: in house in woods; on bridge; terrifies people who flee and are drowned; kills noisy children

H1470-1471: vigilance tests: watch for devastating monster (that lays waste to the land; youngest alone succeeds); watch for thieves in the king's garden

F451.5.2: malevolent dwarf: ungrateful dwarf; dwarfs steal from human beings; steal magic objects; steal food and drink; exchange children in cradle; kidnap mortals; punish; play pranks; curse weapons and treasures

that they are forced to give

F102: accidental arrival in lower world: hero(ine) shoots monster or animal and follows it into lower world; sound of drum followed into ghost town; boy follows nut into lower world

N773-776: adventure from following animal (ogre; dwarf) to cave (lower world); adventure from returning for forgotten item; adventure from pursuing enchanted animal, thieving birds, thieving creatures of any kind; light seen from tree lodging place at night leads to adventures; adventures from trying to strangle oneself in tree

R11: abduction by monster (ogre); prince(ss) abducted by monster; abduction by demon

D1361.1: magic mist of invisibility: demons cause impenetrable fog; magic mist separates person from his or her companions

#### **Section IV: The Descent**

F601: extraordinary or skillful companions: perform hero(ine)'s tasks; help in suitor tests; betray hero(ine); rescue hero(ine); brothers, twins, triplets, etc.; (transformed) animals

F92-98: pit entrance to lower world: through hole made by lifting clumps of grass; person swallowed up by earth and taken to lower world; through opening rocks; through mountain; through cave; water entrance (some kind of water barrier like a waterfall, a river, etc.); boat; ferryman; well; perilous path; rope; descent on animal

F80-81: journey to lower world: physical features of underworld (castle; darkness; dead [A671-679]); descent to lower world of dead; quest to hell for magic object; to get dead person's heart; to visit deceased; to retrieve soul; to get treasures

A670-689: the lower world: torment; north; fire; doorkeeper; horrible sights, smells, sounds; rivers of fire; rivers of ice; fiery nails; islands in a sea of fire; fiery chains; toads; wolves; gnats; scorpions; scratching cats; beings born in the lower world have long bodies and hang with long nails to walls; river; guardian at the bridge; hounds; ship of the doomed; dark puddles; foul odours; world of serpents; place of all obscure knowledge (home of secrets); prison for souls without bodies; vault for stolen objects, stolen qualities, stolen necessities of life

#### **Section V: The Return**

K1931: impostors/companions abandon (or kill) their companion and usurp his place

K677: hero(ine) tests the rope by which he or she is to be pulled up (discovers treachery by weighting it with stones); rope is cut and hero(ine) falls; impostors abandon rope, abandon hero(ine), usually letting the rope drop; hero(ine) hides in treasure box and thus circumvents plot to leave him or her below

K963: rope cut and victim dropped: cutting rope to kill ogre who is climbing the rope to reach his victim; dupe persuaded to climb rope, which breaks; thief climbing rope discovered and rope cut

K1932-1934: impostors claim reward (prize) earned by hero(ine): false head of monster proof; identification by shred of clothing, etc.; impostor forces hero(ine) to change places with him/her; impostor (demon/sorcerer) takes place of king

D2135: magic air journey: by cloud; by carpet; by magic object

B542: animal carries person through air to safety: eagle carries person to safety; helpful eagle; animal saves person from death sentence; eagle carries off abandoned child; transformation to eagle to carry person to safety; person sewed in animal hide carried off by birds; bat rescues person from height; escape on a flying horse

F101: return from lower world: up steep slope; by being slung by a bent tree; on an eagle; on a vulture; escape by magic; escape on miraculously growing tree; ascent on an animal; escape on horse of lightning; escape by a spider's thread; person returning from lower world brings something along unintentionally

B322: helpful animal demands food (eagle [animal] must be fed part of the hero[ine]'s flesh or an eye or asks for a tooth or a finger)

#### **Section VI: Recognition**

K1816.0.3.1: return in disguise as slave, servant, stablehand, etc.; at wedding, feast, important event

T68.1: prince(ss) offered as prize; prince(ss) offered as prize to rescuer or person responsible for fulfilling task

N681: hero(ine) arrives home just as a loved one is marrying another; as funeral is being held; prophecy of

future greatness fulfilled when hero(ine) returns home unrecognized (parents serve him/her)  
 H150-151: circumstances of recognition: attention drawn and recognition follows; attention drawn by magic object(s) and recognition follows; recognition by ability to perform marvels; attention drawn by helpful animal's theft of food; attention drawn by hints dropped by hero(ine) while dressed as slave, servant  
 H80-83: identification by tokens: tokens of royalty (nobility) left with abandoned child; identifying token(s) sent with messenger; rescue tokens: some proof that hero(ine) has succeeded in rescue/task  
 H94.1-11: identification by ring (baked or cooked in food, dropped in wine, on the wrong person's finger, name on ring)  
 H111: identification by garment of some kind  
 Q262: impostor(s) punished  
 L161: lowly hero(ine) marries prince(ss); tasks assigned suitors; humble disguise; prophecy

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# Walking Between Worlds

in defence of experiential research

Kevan Manwaring

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the benefits and challenges of experiential research for a PhD novel in the contemporary fantasy genre and how this has significant qualitative impacts upon the “early drafting” stage of the creative process (Neale 2018). Drawing upon the extensive field research undertaken in the Scottish Borders, with its rich palimpsest of oral tradition, traumatic historicity, and touristic gilding, the article shows how this informed the emergent multimodal approach, resulting in a transmedia novel – one that ‘performs’ the liminality experienced according to a reader-response model. The Scottish Border ballad of ‘Thomas the Rhymer’ (Roud 219: Child 37) is used as a map – both in the field trips to associated locations, and in the creative-critical process itself. Within the ritualised landscape of the ballad three roads offer three ontological choices for not only the protagonist, but also the researcher-writer. Layered over this is Walter Benjamin’s three-step model of the musical, the architectonic, and the textile. How does one negotiate the various tensions of different disciplines? How does one avoid displacement activity in a protracted research project that embraces different modes of enquiry? When and how does one ‘return’ from this crossed threshold? And in what form can one’s findings withstand critical scrutiny, while retaining faith with the initial vision, the demands of the narrative, and the expectations of the reader?



## Introduction

*TRUE Thomas lay on Huntlie bank;  
A ferlie he spied wi' his e'e;  
And there he saw a ladye bright  
Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.  
'Thomas the Rhymer', 12/13<sup>th</sup> C. Anon.*

From 2014-2018 I worked on my Creative Writing PhD at the University of Leicester, the focus of which was to be (ultimately) a transmedia novel, *The Knowing: a Fantasy* – a form which was to emerge as a result of my extensive research into the psychogeography of the Scottish Borders, and the diasporic translocation of tale- and song-cultures to the Southern Appalachians: the palimpsest of history within the Borders, and its cross-fertilisation with North America, I sought to represent through a multimodal approach (Barnard 2019). The challenges of writing an (innovative) genre novel within the academy was part of what pushed me. The inherent tensions of producing a creative artefact within a critical framework is at the heart of creative writing as a discipline in the academy and has been discussed widely (Kureishi 2014: Self 2014: Vanderslice 2011: Webb 2015: Whitehead 2013). To produce something within a *genre* amplifies these tensions: can it withstand the scrutiny? Can such practice-based research result in the production of new knowledge? Though informed by this continuing discourse, my intention here is to focus upon the actuality of my experience.

During the research, composition and editing of my project I have discovered a creative-critical methodology and voice that have been fine-tuned through the by-products of my research, in conference papers, articles, and commissions. This hybrid approach, while growing within an ecosystem of post-colonial discourse (Said 1978: Spivak 1988: Bhaba 1994), was fed in a more intuitive way by 'taproot texts' – i.e. pre-18th-century literature that displays significant elements of proto-fantasy (Clute and Grant 1999: 921-922) – and embodied, experiential research. By drawing upon the rich, troubled history of the Scottish Borders I found not only inspiration in specificity – or 'placiality' (Casey 2013) – but also an extended metaphor for the creative process itself in the examples of liminality, transgression, and retrieval. Like the Border Reivers whose legacy I was to witness first-hand (the defensive architecture of the Peel Towers and Bastle Houses; the place-names and surnames; and

the regional terms and phrases: *blackmail; insight; reiving; hew and cry*, et cetera) I felt that my annual 'raids' into these Debatable Lands produced much plunder. The real challenge, though, was to find a suitable methodology and form to corral my stolen cattle. Which road to take with these riches?

### ***"The steed gaed swifter than the wind": testing the boundaries***

*O they rade on, and farther on,  
The steed gaed swifter than the wind;  
Until they reach'd a desert wide,  
And living land was left behind. (ibid)*

*The Knowing* has attempted to push the boundaries of both form and content – finding fertile ground in the creative tension between the 'Actual and Imaginary', as Nathaniel Hawthorne terms it (1850). I argue that true Fantastika (Clute 2007) the umbrella term for Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror, Weird, and other writing that foregrounds the imaginative over the mimetic, lies within the negative space of these apparent extremes. I certainly choose to pitch my flag in this liminal zone where the magical and the mundane rub shoulders, finding neither straight realism (so-called mimetic fiction) or high fantasy to my taste. I have dramatized this transitional space as 'The Rift' within my novel, a place between the Iron World of humans and the Silver World of the fey – ever widening after the cataclysm of the Sundering, when the Borders were sealed. Yet in my novel there are irruptions on both sides: characters and contraband slip through; and in the trickster figure of Sideways Brannelly, a 19th-century Ulster-American who has become a 'Wayfarer' – a trader between the worlds – I have someone who acts out the synaptic cross-fire between these hemispheres. He smuggles the lost journal of Robert Kirk out from Elfhome, metaphorically mimicking the production of the actual text itself. And in my career as a writer-academic I continually straddle the apparent creative-critical divide, finding it a place of intense creative generation – a Mid-Atlantic Ridge for the black fumers of my mind. Gary Snyder captured this perfectly: 'A frontier is a burning edge, a frazzle, a strange market zone between utterly different worlds' (1990: 15).

### ***"The narrow, the braid, and the bonny": ontology junction***

*'Light down, light down now, true Thomas,  
And lean your head upon my knee;  
Abide ye there a little space,*

*And I will show you ferlies three.*' (ibid)

Instrumental in my experiential methodology were field trips to key sites associated with the folklore (-song; -tale cultures) I was researching. As Robbe-Grillet says: 'Nothing is more fantastic, ultimately, than precision' (1965: 165). These field trips afforded me that precision – the telling detail won through an embodied epistemic. Much of my research focused around Aberfoyle, in the Trossachs (the parish of the Reverend Robert Kirk, 1644-1692, whose 1691 monograph, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, is at the heart of my project), but I also spent a significant amount of time in the Scottish Borders – a place of historical tension that has a remarkable cluster of song, story and lore. Primary among these taproot texts is the supernatural ballad of 'Thomas the Rhymer', attributed to the 13th-century Thomas of Erceldoune but recorded in numerous versions from Sir Walter Scott (1806) onwards (Farrell 2009). The earliest version of this was transcribed by the singer Anna Gordon Brown at the request of collector Alexander Fraser Tytler in 1800 (NLS, Acc. 10611 (2)). Apparently learned from her mother and aunt (Between Worlds exhibition, Durham University, 2017), the ballad appears to have existed exclusively in the oral tradition until Brown was encouraged to write it down for her father for the Musical Society of Aberdeen. At the time (late 18th century) it was fashionable to record ballads, chiefly thanks to the popularity and success of Robert Burns's output, which bestowed upon this oral folk form in the eyes of society, a tinge of respectability.

In the ballad in question, the young Thomas meets the 'queen of fair Elfland' as he idles by the Eildon Hills, near Melrose. Tempted by her offer of a kiss, he is bound to go with her to her otherworldly realm and serve her for seven 'mortal years' (coincidentally the upper limit of a part-time PhD). Crossing through a gloomy, liminal zone where they see 'neither sun nor moon', they pause by another tree where the Queen shows Thomas three roads to choose from:

'O see ye not yon narrow road,  
So thick beset with thorns and briars?  
That is the path of righteousness,  
Tho' after it but few enquires.

'And see ye not that braid braid road,  
That lies across that lily leven?  
That is the path of wickedness,

Tho' some call it the road to heaven.

'And see not ye that bonny road,  
That winds about the fernie brae?  
That is the road to fair Elfland,  
Where thou and I this night maun gae.'  
(Skelton and Blackwood 1989)

These three ontological choices ('ferlies three') chart a metaphorical landscape that resonates with my project and my approach. The 'narrow road' could be read as the critical one – of academic discourse and the minute analysis of literary criticism. The 'braid braid road' could be seen as the purely creative path – expansive, lateral, unboundaried. The former needs the synaptic leap and appeal to the aesthetic of the latter; the latter, the discipline and rigour of the former. Either extreme by itself can be ultimately lacking – too dry or too indulgent. This is a crude distinction, and possibly a false dichotomy, akin to that of left/right brain function myths (Gilchrist 2012), but it will serve our purpose for now. However, there is a third way, as suggested by the Queen of Elfland's choices – the 'bonny road/That winds about the fernie brae'. This is the road that takes the travellers to 'fair Elfland', a place of testing and transformation, gifts and geasa (taboos). And this, I posit, is my path across the creative/critical divide.

In actuality, I have physically experienced this liminal landscape whilst walking the Southern Upland Way, a 212-mile footpath that runs across the Scottish Borders from coast to coast, during the summer of 2017. After several days walking eastwards I reached the Ettrick Valley (home of writer Thomas Hogg, the so-called 'Ettrick Shepherd', and a key setting for my novel). From there I climbed up over the hills into the neighbouring Yarrow Valley, traversing a lonely but lovely moorland: this 'inbetween space', miles from anywhere and anyone, seemed to me to be the most numinous and inspiring I had traversed in two weeks of walking. No doubt enchanted by the psychogeography of the place, with its rich peat of balladry and folklore, social history and the sublime, and by my fugue state of epiphanic exhaustion, it inspired an impromptu song and, later, one of my self-styled 'illuminated poems' ('Between the Yarrow and the Ettrick', unpublished), demonstrating how conducive such liminal spaces (between two places, two states of being) can be: 'bonny roads' of creativity and insight.

### “The tongue that can never lee”: practice-based research

Syne they came to a garden green,  
And she pu'd an apple frae a tree:  
'Take this for thy wages, true Thomas;  
It will give thee the tongue that can never lee.' (ibid)

To qualify practice-based research's validity as a core methodology in my discipline, it is worth citing the NAWE Benchmark Statement: 'original creative work is the essence of research in this practice-led subject' (2008). Emphasising this, Jen Webb, in her analysis of research in creative writing, has said, 'Research in or through creative practice can provide a way to bridge these two worlds: to result in an output that undeniably adds knowledge, while also producing a satisfying work of literature' (2015: 20) My wish here, through the creation of my novel and this accompanying thesis, has been to attempt this. I have endeavoured to do so by drawing upon an embodied and multi-modal approach. My creative practice extends *beyond* the page but feeds *back* into it. To return to the Benchmark Statement: 'Research into content may include **experiential learning**, whereby creative writers put themselves in a particular situation or make an experience happen for the sake of Creative Writing' (2008: 13). The experiential method is at the heart of my creative practice and this project.

As a long-time storyteller, performance poet, host of spoken-word events and (more recently) fledgling folk singer, I have used the performative aspect of my practice to inform my prose fiction, field-testing material to live audiences. In 2002 I co-created and performed in a commissioned storytelling show for the Bath Literature Festival called *Voices of the Past*. In that I performed a monologue as Robert Kirk, the 'fairy minister' of Aberfoyle. I could not have known then that I would undertake a PhD with him as a major focus, or that this kind of 'method-writing', as I call it, repurposing Stanislavski's system (1936: 1948: 1957), would become a central practice of mine. In my subsequent four years of research I explored different iterations of this (long-distance walking; spoken word performance; song-writing; illustration), while self-reflexively challenging such an approach – why not just get on with it? Any of these could so easily become displacement activities *unless* they resulted in actual output or insight. Interrogating my own methodology was critical – although not always easy to achieve. How does one perceive one's blind spots? By starting with

an analysis of others, I hoped to be able to gain a perspective on my own.

### “My tongue is my ain”: taciturn wordsmiths

I dought neither speak to prince or peer,  
Nor ask of grace from fair ladye!—  
'Now haud thy peace, Thomas,' she said,  
'For as I say, so must it be.' (ibid)

In an introduction to her best-known poem, 'Not Waving, but Drowning', Stevie Smith (1966) said that trying to describe how and why you write poetry is 'like digging up plants to see how they're getting on ... we all know what happens to the plants – they die'. Smith seemed wary of brooding too much on (the often hidden) creative process of a poem – its inspiration, gestation and development. She did go on to provide some context for its genesis, so perhaps she was merely playing coy.

This wariness, however, is not uncommon among writers. Hemingway, when interviewed by George Plimpton for the *Paris Review* about his writing, responded with a customary growl: 'It is not the writer's province to explain it or to run guided tours through the more difficult country of his work' (1965: 230)

Amy Tan also warned against revealing the hidden workings behind a novelist's legerdemain when discussing her 'writer's memoir', *Where the Past Begins* (2017). Finding herself reflecting on 'how I write and what inspires me', Tan regretted the disclosure upon publication: 'once it was done I realised you shouldn't explain the magic tricks. Writing shouldn't be dissected and pulled apart' (Tan 2018).

In his discussion on authorial 'intentions' Philip Pullman (2017a: 113-121) bemoans the 'occupational hazard' of the writer continually asked about their ideas at book festival events, 'where the task at hand is that of entertaining an audience rather than revealing deep and complex truths' (2017: 114). The experienced writer will often have 'instant stories about telling a story' (ibid) at their disposal – pat answers that elicit a crowd-pleasing response.

When I asked Liz Lochhead about her 'creative process' at the Bath Literature Festival in 2003 she quipped, 'a pen and a piece of paper'. Was she being deliberately disingenuous? Another magician not wishing to reveal her stage secrets? Just playing to the

crowd (a large packed Guildhall)? Or was she truly unaware of her own methodology? And does that matter?

As a self-reflexive writer in the academy I do not have the luxury of fobbing off such interrogations, but must scrutinise my process, searching for 'deep and complex truths' (ibid). What is often instinctual and chthonic – arising mysteriously from the depths of the subconscious, written in a fugue state, a first draft groped towards in the dark – as Philip Pullman (2017b) also articulates – must now be examined in the harsh light of the laboratory. In such conditions I hope it will not wither, but flourish – the laboratory becoming a greenhouse.

It is tempting to speculate that writers struggle at, or are resistant to, articulating their creative process because the creative act occurs in one part of the brain, the critical in another – the classic left/right brain split. However crude this distinction – one that is a false dichotomy (Gilchrist 2012) – it provides a useful metaphor. These two 'sides' of the brain are in continual communication – lightning fields of synaptic firings across the hemispheres – but sometimes the communication breaks down (Sachs 1985). The 'zone' we are in when we write (creatively) *may* be a very different one from the editing or critical space. This methodological schizophrenia seems endemic to the academy: Tolkien critiqued the Lit/Lang divide in his 1959 valedictory address to Merton College (1997: 224:240); and in many modern English faculties there seems an unbridgeable gulf between the disciplines of creative writing and English literature, although clearly they are part of the same ecosystem (Harper/Kerridge 2010: 1-5). Personally, I have found the creative and critical approaches to be not mutually exclusive; indeed they cross-fertilise in productive ways. For me, their shared border is the 'hot zone' of emergence. If one is able to hold the tension between these approaches, straddling the place of negotiated territory, a Debatable Land of creative reiving and insight, then great things can emerge.

In my own creative-critical practice I have found field trips to relevant, resonant locations, combined with archival research, and the resultant narrativizing of my experiences (a grafting of the historical and the Fantastic) especially effective. Adopting what Barnard discusses in her exploration of multimodality, citing Webb and Brien (2019: 124) as the '*bricoleur*-bowerbird approach', my methodology

is an imaginative weaving together of materials, influences, and experiences. This echoes an aspect of Walter Benjamin's triadic approach to the production of good prose.

### ***Warp and weft: the musical, the architectonic and the textile***

Walter Benjamin suggested that to 'Work on good prose [one has to follow] ... three steps: a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven' (2015: 61). To extend the metaphor of these points in relation to my practice-based research: I would argue that the 'musical' stage has involved the composition of my work as informed by my research into folk music (English; Scottish; Appalachian), folk dance (Border Morris), ballad-singing and learning to play an instrument (guitar/mandolin). The 'architectonic' stage encompasses a month spent in Hawthornden Castle as a writer-in-residence, where I worked on a second draft, informed by the physical experience of staying in a castle that was the former residence of William Drummond. This was complemented by my visits to Edinburgh (with its many levels and wynds, the latter suggesting 'portals' from one 'textual layer' to another); and to Appalachia, where I visited 'old' timber-frame buildings and modern Asheville. The 'textile' stage has been enriched by the numerous talks and seminars I have attended on the craft of creative writing, by detailed feedback from my supervisor, by close readings from a select peer group (including American friends), by the study of particular authors (Graham Joyce; John Crowley; Robert Holdstock; Susan Hill; Elizabeth Hand; Philip Pullman; among many others), by visits to exhibitions (e.g. Appalachian Women, aSHEville Women's Museum, Asheville, NC, September 2015; Alice in Wonderland, British Library, March 2016; Certain Wytches: Fear, Myth and Magick: Anne Jackson, Museum in the Park, Stroud, October 2017; The Lost Words: Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris, Compton Verney, October 2017) and by reading interviews with writers (chiefly 'The Art of Fiction' in the *Paris Review*, 1953–2018).

In actuality, Benjamin's triad relates to the formation of the text and to extend it beyond this to justify my wide-ranging activities and interests risks punishing the metaphor. So, to augment Benjamin's process, it is necessary to apply Christopher Frayling's useful demarcation of arts research into three modes of enquiry: 'Research ... for practice (activities

supporting the artist in her or his work), *through* practice (creative drafting and editing), *into* practice (e.g. observations of artists at work)' (1993). Any artist worth their salt will engage with these at different stages, often flowing organically between them: they are, in my mind, part of one continuum. But rather than reject them as a redundant taxonomy I would also argue for their validity as a lucid parsing of this process (the splitting of the spectrum that does no harm to its source-light). *For, through* and *into*, my practice-based research strove to cast light into every corner. If blind spots occurred, it was through no fault of this multi-modal method of enquiry.

### ***An otter's-eye view: fishing for qualia***

*O they rade on, and farther on,  
And they waded rivers abune the knee;  
And they saw neither sun nor moon,  
But they heard the roaring of the sea.* (ibid)

Complementing archival research and the practical application of craft, my preferred method of research, when it comes to bringing alive the world of my characters and their settings, is an experiential one. I find that by visiting actual locations connected to my story (wherever possible) or having analogous experiences, I soak up atmosphere in an immersive, multi-sensory way (which no amount of text research could replicate), creating a reservoir of experiences and associations that I can draw upon in the recreation of the setting or characters' perceptions. And I stumble upon telling details, things I would only notice in situ, which often influence my creative decisions. This form of 'qualia-capture' (Lodge 2002: 14) is intrinsic to the performance of authenticity that follows, rather as a method actor draws upon childhood memories, past traumas and triumphs, importing them into their performance to give it the ring of truth.

There are counter-arguments to this approach. Geoff Dyer's excoriating deconstruction of an experiential method in his attempt to write a biography about D.H. Lawrence (2012) proves, at least, that it did not work for him; but that does not invalidate it as a methodology. Some writers relish field research; others prefer to do research from the comfort of their study. What matters, ultimately, is the writing. The embodied method provides me with a visceral experience to draw upon and allows me to inhabit the zone of my characters. The imported affect helps to create an ambience of authenticity within

the prose. However, the notion of 'authenticity' in a piece of creative writing has been increasingly problematized in recent years (Whitehead 2010: Baker 2014: Darwin and De Groot 2014). James Frey's controversial 'memoir' of alcoholism and recovery, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), has achieved notoriety for its initial claims to be a genuine memoir of recovery from addiction (Wyatt 2006). The device of verisimilitude is as old as storytelling itself, but first modernism then post-modernism have challenged that – the unreliable narrator (Hobsbaum 1995: 37–46) destabilizing the omniscient claims of the Grand Narrative (Lyotard 1979). Any claims of truthfulness seem increasingly slippery in a post-truth age. And mimetic fiction's traditional claim to realism has been increasingly destabilised by the bot-generated fictions of 'fake news'. What seems real can no longer be trusted. As Chabon observes, fictional truth 'is under siege by spurious fact in so many ways' (in Clark 2017). And there are plenty of examples of novels that have been written without any experiential research. Stef Penney's award-winning debut novel, *The Tenderness of Wolves* (2006), convincingly evokes the Alaskan wilderness despite the author having never set foot there. Exhaustive research does not guarantee the 'success' of a literary project, as Iain Sinclair pithily articulates:

You can make as many charts as you like, plot graphs with different-coloured inks, predict movements, the arguments of ungrateful characters. You can spend years ploughing through biographies, reminiscences of tourists in search of the pastoral; libraries of geology, church histories, mythology. You can visit every site a dozen times, live on the road. It makes no difference. The first sentence on the page and the game's up, the story goes its own way. A fly that refuses to buzz. (2001: 307)

Yet even Sinclair, the flâneur par excellence, acknowledges the efficacy of both the physical act of walking (2013) and what he calls the 'trance of writing': 'The trance of writing is the author's only defence against the world. He sleepwalks between assignments, between welcoming ghosts, looking out for the next prompt, the next milestone hidden in the grass' (2006: 362).

Haruki Murakami is a strong advocate for running and writing, not necessarily for inspiration, but to balance out the sedentary life-style, clear the mind and inculcate what he sees as essential qualities

for the (novel) writer: focus and endurance (2009: 76–83; 96–97). For him, running is an intrinsic part of his writing practice, a way to counteract the loneliness of the long-distance writer: ‘Writing novels and running full marathons are very much alike. Basically a writer has a quiet, inner motivation, and doesn’t seek validation in the outwardly visible’ (2009: 10).

Whatever other authors refute (Dyer 2012) or advocate in their methodology, I find that experiential research does help *me*. It affords me an ‘otter’s-eye view’ (Macfarlane 2005) of the terrain of the novel I am inhabiting, as Macfarlane describes in the approach of Henry Williamson:

Williamson’s research was obsessive-compulsive – writing as method acting. He returned repeatedly to the scenes of Tarka’s story as it developed. He crawled on hands and knees, squinting out sightlines, peering at close-up textures, working out what an otter’s-eye view of Weest Gully or Dark Hams Wood or Horsey Marsh would be. So it is that the landscape in Tarka is always seen from a few inches’ height: water bubbles ‘as large as apples’, the spines of ‘blackened thistles’, reeds in ice like wire in clear flex. The prose of the book has little interest in panoramas – in the sweeps and long horizons which are given to eyes carried at five feet. (2005)

As a keen walker, my experiential research includes, like Williamson’s, literal fieldwork. As part of my way into the world of my novel I have walked long-distance footpaths: Hadrian’s Wall (2014), West Highland Way (2015), Offa’s Dyke (2016), Southern Uplands Way (2017) – a collective distance of 568 miles – walks exploring borders and debatable lands. And I have discovered my enjoyment of singing in the process ... While walking the West Highland Way solo I started to pick a song each day to keep me going (Manwaring 2015). For Offa’s Dyke I created a deliberate songbook. These walks gave me an embodied sense of geography, of psychogeography – following mindfully in the footsteps of great walker-writers like Thoreau, Leigh Fermor, Solnit, Sinclair, Sebald, Macfarlane, Shepherd, et al., and plenty of time to think about borders.

So, what did all this effort actually result in?

### **“He has gotten a cloak of the even cloth”: some conclusions**

*He has gotten a coat of the even cloth,*

*And a pair o’ shoon of the velvet green;  
And till seven years were gane and past,  
True Thomas on earth was never seen.* (ibid)

All these “researches” *for, through and into* practice (Frayling 1993) have enriched the “diegetic universe” (Scott and Roffey 2017) of my novel – the world-building, visualisation of scenes and depiction of characters. The response from audiences, discussion generated and comments garnered in my spoken-word activities have helped create a fertile feedback loop (text-to-stage/stage-to-text). My archival research has uncovered invaluable details (marginalia; poems; diary entries), which have directly fed back into the novel – through characterisation, plot and the paratextual.

In terms of the impact of this multimodal, experiential approach on my creative-critical practice, and the production of an ‘original contribution to knowledge’ (my PhD novel and commentary) I can summarise the following three main outcomes: embodiment, form, and performance. In terms of embodiment, experiencing the liminality of the Borders physically made my depiction of such settings and states viscerally more authentic – importing the telling detail, the view from the ground, and the muscle memory of the long walk, its rhythm and moods, the cumulative ambient affect of such ‘storied’ places. In terms of form, this liminality fed directly into my adoption of a transmedia approach to my novel: creating a hybrid form that contains text and image, and (on the website) audio and video recordings, photographs, micro-narratives, articles, artwork, comic strip, poetry, and folk tales. And finally, in terms of performance, the field research resulted in both a poetry collection, *Lost Border*, performed at the Cheltenham Poetry Festival; and a storytelling and music show, ‘The Bonnie Road’, performed at several venues including a Scottish castle. Individually, such outputs may not qualify as ‘original’, but the *combined range* of them creates something unique – their warp and weft a plaid of Benjaminesque texture.

Benjamin’s triadic structure provides a practicable ‘arc’ for the creation of any long prose project. It provides useful reminders of the focus for each stage: the expansiveness of the musical, the application of the architectonic, and the exactitude of the textile. Intersected by the experiential, the textual field created is enriched by the nutrients of practice-based research. Reified by this mulch of methodological

layers, the abstract becomes embodied. It is these three 'threads' which I argue are the true 'ferlies three' of any good prose.

In conclusion, I have found my writing develops through experiential research, performance, illustration and engagement with the world (via panels, commissions, workshops, residencies and social media) – from having an expansive, outward-looking practice. All of this has helped to ground my contemporary fantasy novel in a convincing milieu, the all-important texture without which any prose fiction is threadbare.

Each reader who chooses to wrap themselves in my cross-world plaid must, ultimately, make up their own mind, but early reviewers suggest all of this exhaustive experiential research might have paid off:

Manwaring's novel feels true in the way that certain stories do, as if the author hadn't written it so much as discovered it, already complete and ready to be revealed.  
(Penny 2017)

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## Volume 7 - submissions now open

### writing in practice



This next volume, to be published in April 2021, is a Special Issue on Multimodal Writing with guest co-editor Josie Barnard. As usual, we are looking for articles on the art of imaginative writing from an authorial perspective. Articles should highlight evolving current academic thinking and practice. There will also be a Special Section focusing on multimodality - submissions for this need not have a 'digital' element. Multimodal writing topics might, for example: consider how material entities – clothes, food, places - are embedded in creative writing process and practice; offer alternative uses of social media platforms (e.g. for innovative self-publishing); or address 'non-linear' writing, for websites or games. The issue will not be limited exclusively to multimodal writing topics; other contributions are welcome.

Creative Writing itself is welcomed when integral to an article. Submissions should be 4-10,000 words long and include an abstract of up to 200 words. All submissions will be anonymously peer reviewed. See the contributor guidelines to submit your work via the submissions link:

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# national association of writers in education

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