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# **First Pages: Questions for Editing**

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# First Pages

## Questions for Editing

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### 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 diverse 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 ‘screyer’ 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 Governess 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 dugs” 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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**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.