Minding the Gap

Minding the Gap:

Writing across Thresholds and Fault Lines

Edited by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

MINDING THE GAP
BETWEEN WAS AND WILL BE

THOM CONROY AND GAIL PITTAWAY

Passengers on the British railway and underground must "mind the gap" because it's dangerous not to. In a state of embarking or disembarking, passengers must stay aware of the small but significant space separating the stationary from the moving. The contemporary practices of writing and reading are in constant motion, and the phrase "mind the gap" captures an essential aspect of the way language and literature progress as they pass through any number of social, technical, and political exchanges. "Minding the gap" also suggests an awareness of the always shifting distance between the expected and the unexpected, the ordinary and the impossible, the familiar and unimagined. Speaking of the novel in particular, Eudora Welty advises us that writing must be "something that never was before and will not be again". The "never was and never will be" may serve as the best description we have of literature. It is the stuff of betwixt and between, the linguistic spandrel, the mushroom you can't stop sprouting in the fertile but perilous ground between was and will be.

Creative Writing as an academic discipline is into its fourth decade in Australasia and, increasingly, academics and practitioners are being challenged to balance their contributions to the growing canon of writing about writing against the impact of the reality of a dwindling print media industry. Long cherished as the love-child of the arts and humanities, creative writing is now flirting with the sciences, social media and business, as these disciplines develop new emphases upon storytelling and narrative. Gaps between disciplines are closing as the former "silo" structures of academic programmes become merged. The following chapters started life at a conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) at Massey University, in Wellington, New Zealand, in November 2014, where the original call for papers under the

title of "Minding the gap: writing across thresholds and fault-lines" attracted a wide range of papers and discussions—well beyond the imagination of the convenors—to consider concepts and practices such as "writing across the gaps, reading between the lines, unearthing writing, writing across thresholds, fault lines and storylines". With an eye to the physical gap between nations and an ear to the rumbling of earthquakes in our region, we also encouraged papers about building and rebuilding writing, survivor stories, and strategies for writers across gaps of time and place. Many of these fine contributions can be found on the website of the AAWP, www.aawp.org.au, published under the conference proceedings.

This volume follows on from that conference, advising us to mind the gap between the way writing and reading are experienced today and the possibilities for their perception tomorrow. Those who write, teach, or study within a stone's throw of the academy are aware of the unprecedented changes and challenges facing creative writing and the associated fields of creative practice and literary study. In an era when the interest in literature and the links between literature and popular culture are more pronounced than ever before, the bodies that fund, evaluate, and enable creative writing in the academy have grown increasingly dubious of the value of a tradition that has, until recently, been seen as crucial to the progress of knowledge—indeed, as Camus once remarked, "The purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself". While those who practice creative writing and reading—and both require innovation and originality—remain convinced of the urgent need for creative writing in today's world, there is no question that we are being tasked with finding new ways to make words speak in the digital cacophony.

The range and breadth of chapters also call attention to the gappy nature of language itself. Like the spaces that pepper each sentence, language and literature operate across, between, and sometimes in spite of the breaks in meaning, genre, and cognition. Meeting the challenges of new conceptions of and expectations around writing means we have the opportunity to find new ways to conceive of what it is we do and how we go about doing it. While the cultural role of creativity has never been more central, our charge is to craft fresh articulations of the primacy of the literary imagination. Writing across gaps requires cooperation and connection, and in the conceptions of writing in this volume, we find new configurations of genre, fresh approaches to creative research, and innovative approaches to old questions around practice, failure, and readerly cognition. Novel understandings of the ways in which language functions inevitably lead to new possibilities for pleasure: in the gap that once separated memoir and fiction arise new understandings of genre; in

the space between real and invented languages appear new possibilities for creation; in the white space surrounding textual fragments emerge new constellations of meaning and nuance.

Minding the gaps in language and literature also involves paying attention to the gaps that form the identity of those performing the writing and reading. Each act of composition, each episode of reading and interpretation is grounded in the particularities of an individual experience constituted in terms of culture, ethnicity, class, and gender. Every voyage of imagination launches from its own shore, and every landfall reconstitutes the space between near and far. The essays in this volume ask us to be mindful of the gap between home and terra incognito, and they enable us to stretch this vision backward in time, extending our awareness of the way identity has been produced, maintained, and, in some cases, complicated beyond recognition.

In the provocatively titled "Masturbating with Prostitutes: Research and the Realist Novel", Shady Cosgrove grapples with the intersection of research and ethics in realist fiction. The chapter distinguishes between two forms of research that are essential to realism: fact-checking—which involves the gathering of real world details relevant to the story—and a second form of research which Cosgrove calls "the production of new knowledge". "Thresholds of innovation: Conceptualising imaginative writing and fiction autobiography" takes up the associated question of how methods of research relate to our understanding of the slippery distinction between imaginative writing about people and biography proper. Situating his own research on the life of Millicent Bryant—Australia's first female aviator—in the context of other imaginative biographical writing, James Vicars argues that conventional research based on historical artefacts such as letters can be combined with what Hayden White calls "knowing in practice" to join emotional truth to factual knowledge.

Donna Lee Brien's "Transgressive consumption: Reading between the lines of the alcohol-based memoir" undertakes a re-classification of a memoir in an effort to refine our knowledge of the sub-genres of memoir. Arguing for the need for genre study to "tease out an understanding of [memoir] and its possible significance", this chapter classifies accounts of drinking into categories based on culture, history, terms of production and consumption. After a review of alcohol-based memoirs ranging in genre from the celebratory to the denial to the recovery, Brien concludes that this study, and others like it, can assist in resituating certain types of popular memoir and provide a framework for ongoing genre research. In "History, historical fiction, and 'phenomenological longing'", Thom Conroy argues that historical fiction can respond to that same phenomenological longing

to move beyond the text that characterises conventional history. Conroy maintains that narrative constructivist historians overlook the ethical obligation that many writers of realist historical fiction feel both toward their subject matter and their readers; and he goes on to consider the phenomenological longing underpinning his intentions in writing his historical novel, *The Naturalist*.

In the chapter "Writing between two shores: Migration and the personal essay", Diane Comer chronicles the use of the personal essay to depict and evoke the experience of migration to New Zealand. In an effort to expose "insights into migration that might not otherwise manifest," Comer shares the stories of migrants to New Zealand and frames their revelations in the context of her own migration from Christchurch to Sweden. Gail Pittaway's chapter takes up the theme of migrant stories. "Voyaging the gaps: ethnography through Scandinavian Sagas of Migration" documents Pittaway's investigation into her own family history, that of migrants to New Zealand in the Nineteenth Century, and reflects on the gaps in history, time and geographical space that serve to obscure or illuminate that knowledge.

Denise Beckton's chapter, "Lost in translation; using fictional language as a form of narrative" moves to considerations of invented languages and bridges gaps between literary writing, children's writing and popular culture. She discusses the nature and function of the unique languages created by J.R.R. Tolkien, Richard Adams and George R.R. Martin, among other writers, and their effect in each narrative as enriching and enhancing the worlds and the works created.

Another writer is celebrated in Dominique Hecq's densely scoped and intensely argued chapter "Fault-lines: Creativity and the lure of language in 'The Carpathians'". Hecq explores Janet Frame's invention and intervention between "the raw materials of art; signifier, signified; literal, figurative; metonymy, metaphor; fact, fiction; self, other". In a change of direction, but still adhering to canonical authorship in subject matter, in "Writing across platforms: Adapting classics for social media", Jessica Seymour traces the means by which the works of Austen, Fitzgerald and Brontë are not only being adapted, but rewritten, re-imaged, re-dressed and revised for onscreen and online games and web-series. Seymour's chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the language of vlogging, transmedia texts and the world of online fandom, while arguing for the relevance of extending Foucault's concept of heterotopia to include these electronic texts.

From social and transmedia, we move to neurological concerns. "Playing with gaps: Science and the creative writer" investigates the

complex relationships underpinning cognition, literature, and reading, especially as they apply to American short story writer Lydia Davis. The gaps in the way our brains process information, Lisa Smithies argues, provide cognitive structures that literary writing can exploit to various ends. Smithies turns to the work of Davis as a striking example of the ways that writers can manipulate elements of cognitive function to create meaning and evoke emotion. She concludes by discussing Davis's own theoretically-informed process of composition, which operates as "a form of cognitive information processing" linked to the creation of poignant fiction.

The collection ends with two chapters reflecting on aspects of failure as a significant yet regularly overlooked component of writing and art. In "The creative writing doctorate as survival story: Minding the gap between success and failure", Jeri Kroll examines the gap between failure and success in PhD candidature in the arts. She cites two particular "successful failures" in science and architecture as indications of where the mentor and supervisor might be encouraged to see that "the full articulation of a project might only be possible in the future" and not necessarily at the moment of submission of a thesis. She argues, "Failure can lead practitioners in new directions, close pathways, solve specific problems that turn out to be more significant than the project as a whole and suggest more fruitful questions to pose".

Jen Webb is similarly concerned with failure in the final chapter "Ovid's artists and mythic failure", and interweaves her current collaborative research project of interviewing poets from across the "Anglophone community" where failure is repeatedly reported as an incentive to "fail better", with stories of artists who "fail well". She widens the scope of the chapter with rumination upon the life of Ovid and a selection of the artist vignettes whose stories he recounts in *The Metamorphoses*, "as object lessons for the emerging artist: a list of things to do, and not do, in order to avoid ending up banished to outer Romania, or turned into a flower or torn to shreds by angry Maenads." This chapter brings us back from our original initiative of minding gaps in writing and reading for today and our anticipation of these for tomorrow, to a reminder that, yesterday and beyond that into myth and the earliest utterances of our kind, it has always been fearless perseverance which has taken the artist across the gap between failure and success.

In *Minding the gap: Writing across thresholds and fault lines*, we have tried to develop a gap-closing thread of ideas: from considerations of the writer as activist researcher to the writer as reader; to the reader and the reader as writer; on to the writer as mentor and student; and, finally, to the

writer as artist. Perhaps more of a mesh than a thread and maybe more of a spiral than a circle is stitched, but we are confident that in these chapters, in the minding of gaps, we pay attention to the delicate shifting ground of our graft—past, present and future.

CHAPTER ONE

MASTURBATING WITH PROSTITUTES:
RESEARCH AND THE REALIST NOVEL

SHADY COSGROVE

Introduction

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, writer William T. Vollman states:

> One of the things that I had to do occasionally while I was collecting information for that prostitute story, "Ladies and Red Lights" from *The Rainbow Stories*, was sit in a corner and pull down my pants and masturbate. I would pretend to do this while I was asking the prostitutes questions. Because otherwise, they were utterly afraid of me and utterly miserable, thinking I was a cop (2000: 1).

Vollman offers an interesting entry point to a discussion about fiction writing, research and ethics. Indeed, this chapter began as a consideration of whether or not fiction writers of the academy should be required to obtain ethics clearance when live subjects are involved in their research. It is difficult to imagine a study leave application that outlines brothel research as described above; however, a tenet of creative writing is to write what you know, or as writer Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky says, "know what you write" (2007: 1). This is not always straightforward, certainly in the face of university bureaucracy. However, it's worth considering that research for fiction *is* an ethical matter: both in the ensuing representations that are published but also in the fact it can affect those who are researched. This chapter begins by clarifying the types of research involved in novel writing, specifically within the context of realist literary fiction. It will then argue that because of realist literary conventions, an expectation of verisimilitude exists with regard to representation and these expectations have ethical implications for authors who are researching and writing realist fiction.

Research—fact-checking versus the academy

This paper differentiates between two types of research that can inform novel writing—the first being fact-checking, the second being the production of new knowledge. The research of fact-checking, in the style of journalism, is the research that novelists undertake to ascertain details relevant to the story. For instance, writer Don Delillo cited books, magazines, scientific reports, audiotapes and film footage as sources of information that were useful to him as he researched his novel *Libra*:

> [T]here were times when I felt an eerie excitement, coming across an item that seemed to bear out my own theories. Anyone who enters this maze knows you have to become part scientist, novelist, biographer, historian and existential detective (1993: 1).

I had a similar experience in writing the book *What the Ground Can't Hold* (2013). I read extensively on avalanches, interviewed avalanche experts and reviewed video footage of avalanches as the novel is set in the Andes, and an avalanche is the inciting incident of the book. This research was not primary—I did not venture into avalanche zones or witness avalanches firsthand but rather used secondary research to imagine the experience of witnessing/possibly surviving an avalanche.

Writer Barbara Kingsolver gives preference to primary research over secondary research when she says: "The difference between amateur and professional research is a willingness to back away from other people's accounts of what is, and find your own. There is no 'googlesmell'" (Kingsolver, 2014: 1). And while circumstances don't always make this possible (for example, in the case of realist novels set well in the past or amidst dangerous situations like avalanches), I do agree that it is usually preferable. Kingsolver goes on to say:

> If I want to remove you from your life and whisk you into a picnic on the banks of a river in Teotihuacán, here are some things I need to know: what grows there, what trees, what flowers, in that month of the year? What does it smell like, are there bees? … Passing on someone else's account of these things, from reading about them, would likely render a flat, one-dimensional scene, no matter how I injected my own additions of plot and character. The sensory palette would be limited. I can only paint with all the colors if I've seen them for myself (2014: 1).

In this chapter, I will refer to both this primary and secondary research as fact-checking research because whether or not the author has witnessed the material firsthand or discovered it through other sources, it is still the

research of fact-checking. I will now argue that this type of research is distinct from the research of the academy.

According to the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans, there are many definitions of research: "These include systematic investigation to establish facts, principles or knowledge and a study of some matter with the objective of obtaining or confirming knowledge. A defining feature of research is the validity of its results" (2007, 2014: 6). For the purpose of this chapter, academic creative research will be defined as creative inquiry aimed at the production of new knowledge. For those engaged with Australian ERA processes, creative work (also known as non-traditional outputs) must be accompanied by a research statement that includes: the research background, the research contribution and the research significance. That is, creative work that is to be counted as research within the tertiary sector must include a statement demonstrating that the author understands their research context, how their creative work contributes to this field and how their creative work is significant.

These two types of research—fact-checking and the production of new knowledge—are different endeavours; however, this paper argues the research of fact-checking can be critical to the research of producing new knowledge within the context of writing realist fiction. Delillo went to various American locations to scout out information for his novel. This fact-checking research had a palpable effect on his creative production:

> There were several levels of research—fiction writer's research … I went to New Orleans, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Miami and looked at houses and streets and hospitals, schools and libraries—this is mainly Oswald I'm tracking but others as well—*and after a while the characters in my mind and in my notebooks came out into the world* (1993: 1) (my italics).

When Delillo states "after a while the characters in my mind and in my notebooks came out into the world", he is talking about the work of producing new knowledge, which can occur within the context of fact-checking research. That is, the fact-checking research is what led to 'the characters…[coming] out into the world.' Writers undertake this fact-checking because they need details they don't know and, embedded in this unknowing, is an innate flexibility: the shape of the author's project may change on account of additional information. This interplay—between fact-checking and the production of new creative knowledge—is relevant when we talk about research in the context of novel writing. Writer Lobanov-Rostovsky also supports this connection when he says the writer "combines…research with imagination" (2007: 1). That is, fact-checking

plus imagination can yield the research of new knowledge.

Writer and academic Catherine McKinnon offers another example of how creative research (new knowledge) is made possible through the research of fact-checking. In her article *Writing white, writing black, and events at Canoe Rivulet*, McKinnon describes her ambivalence regarding the writing process:

> If I didn't write an Indigenous narrator was I really writing about what it meant to be Australian? If I couldn't write an Indigenous narrator did that mean I couldn't write a Greek narrator? Or a Turkish one? It seems absurd to suggest that a writer should never write outside his or her own experience (2012: 2).

For McKinnon, one way to avoid this misappropriation was to ensure her research was thorough and primary. This fact-checking research made it possible for her to pursue the research of new thought/ideas. Interviews, in particular, provided key data:

> Fictionalizing first contact stories, I discovered, requires a comprehensive research approach that acknowledges and respects contemporary Indigenous cultural protocols, recognises past misuse of Indigenous stories by white Australian authors, and is sensitive to the unique place of story within Indigenous culture. Interviewing Indigenous elders was an important – vital – component of my attempt to fill in the gaps prevalent in the historical documentary material and hypothesise about the meeting between the Europeans and the Kooris (2012: 5-6).

My argument here is that frequently, the research of creative practice—the production of new knowledge—cannot be separated from the research of fact-checking. That is, one can bear influence on the other. The research of checking your facts impacts on the creation of new creative material—otherwise it wouldn't be necessary. This point is important when examining how novel-writing research is conducted (in both fact-checking and knowledge production terms of the word) and the ethics of the research process.

Verisimilitude in realist fiction

Let me now turn to assumptions regarding realist fiction. The Oxford English Dictionary offers this definition of realism: "close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, the rendering of precise details of the real thing or scene" (2014: 1). That is, realist texts are concerned with resembling what is "real" or offering a representation that is "faithful" to

the original. As literary theorist, Pam Morris states: "Realist plots and characters are constructed in accordance with secular empirical rules. Events and people in the story are explicable in terms of natural causation without resort to the supernatural or divine intervention" (2003: 3). In other words, characters and plot points are understood within the context of natural causation: one thing leads to the next.

This is not to say that realist novels are exact replicas of the realities they portray. Realist novels are composed of words, and by the nature of that fact, they can't offer an exact imitation of the object under scrutiny: the word "bed" will never be an actual bed. Or, as Morris states: "…literary realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents" (2003: 4). Literary theorist Lilian Furst explains further: "The places of realist fiction can be conveyed only in words and are therefore ultimately the product of an illusion: 'un stable fantasme' ('a stable illusion'), as Butor calls it" (1995: viii). I take this to mean that while the word "bed" will never be an actual bed, in realist fiction it will continue being the representation of a bed. It won't turn into a dragon or a pear. It will continue the stable illusion of "bed-ness" within the context of the narrative.

According to Furst, this tension of the never-quite-bed bed—or the relationship between truth and representation—is one of the things that makes realist fiction exciting: "It is in the very precariousness of its endeavor that the ultimate attraction of the realist novel resides: in its risky attempt to create truth and/in illusion" (1995: 2). Realist fiction is a series of risky attempts to replicate reality, inevitably drawing attention to the reality that is being represented. Realism is often concerned with representing the human, as Robert Hauptman states: "Given the conventions of fiction, the work must give the impression that it is true to itself and honestly reflects the human condition" (2008: 325-6). However one issue with this is that what constitutes "the human condition" is not a settled matter. According to Morris:

> The term realism almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it. It is, thus, a term that is frequently invoked in making fundamental ethical and political claims or priorities, based upon perceptions of what is "true" or "real". As such, the usage is often contentious and polemical (2003: 2).

Indeed notions of truth, representation and realism are large ones and this essay could focus on these arguments exclusively. However, for the sake of containment, let us say that realist literary fiction is concerned with representing reality, whatever that may mean for the author. There is a

sense of causation with regard to character and plot, and regardless of whether the actual events have taken place or whether those exact characters exist, within realism there is a sense that the "real" world is somehow being represented. That is, if I set a novel in Argentina, the reader would assume my details and descriptions of Argentina ring true to the actual place. Readers often assume that (even if the work is fictional) if the text is realist, some attempt has been made to represent reality. This can be seen in non-Australian reader responses to Marlo Morgan's fictional book *Mutant Message Down Under.* As Cath Ellis states in her essay *Helping Yourself: Marlo Morgan and the Fabrication of Indigenous Wisdom*:

> This is disturbing precisely because the book, which is routinely taken by non-Australian readers to be an accurate, non-fictional account of Australian Indigenous culture, is in fact a complete fabrication" (2004: 149).

Even though Morgan has admitted the work is a fiction, readers nonetheless assume she has researched Australian Indigenous culture and take it to be an accurate reflection. For this chapter, these assumptions of research embedded in the reading of realism are the point where research (both as fact-checking and as the production of new knowledge) and ethics collide.

Ethics in all of this

Reader assumptions that realist fiction is representing reality, even if specific events and characters have been made up, are why research (fact-checking) matters to research (production of new knowledge), and are one reason why the realist novel writing project is one with ethical implications. In Australia, research within the university sector that involves human participants must be approved by an accredited Human Research Ethics Committee. The University of Wollongong's Human Research Ethics Committee web page states that its primary purpose is "to protect the welfare and rights of the participants of the research" and its secondary purpose is to "facilitate research of benefit to the wider community" (2014: 1). With this in mind, novelists of the academy should consider: A) how human participants are affected through the course of the research and writing; and B) how their research is of benefit to the wider community. In a situation like McKinnon's, cited above, where official interviews were part of the project, this seems to be a clear mandate: the writer-researcher within the academy applies for ethics clearance before

undertaking interviews to ensure that he/she understands the ethical implications of their research on those being researched. But what about spontaneous interactions? Consider an author exploring a city to capture details of setting. He/she stumbles across someone who offers interesting insights about the city and those insights are woven into the realist text. Does the author have an ethical obligation to disclose the fact they're a writer to the interested bystander? Does it matter as long as the work is deemed fiction? If there's no apparent connection between the bystander and the information in the novel, does it matter? What if the bystander is adversely affected anyway?

It also must be acknowledged that much authorial research occurs during the course of being alive and living day-to-day. An interesting insight might not occur on a research trip but at the local Parents and Citizens meeting. Does an author need to predicate every human interaction with the clause that he/she is a writer and anything that takes place might provide imaginative fodder? Obviously this is ludicrous; after all, authors are influenced by events in their pasts. Writer T.D. McKinnon states:

> All writers are natural observers, and so their research is a never ending undertaking. Writers of fiction…allow storylines and characters et cetera to flow from a rich imagination that is banked up by a lifetime of observation (a virtual plethora of research)' (2013: 1).

As a writer, I wouldn't claim to be a natural observer—in fact, I've been forced to work on being a better observer to be a better writer—but certainly authors can access memory and use that in crafting fiction. Writer Ian McEwan did so in writing the novel *Sweet Tooth* (2012). As he stated in an interview:

> I drew heavily in ways which I haven't done before on my own past. So I, too, like Tom Haley was at the University of Sussex. I was writing short stories in the early '70s. I drew on the cultural milieu of a very important literary magazine *The New Review* … It was an odd experience of re-entering my imagination of that time (2012).

If novelists draw on their pasts, they can't journey back in time to warn interested parties. The argument here is not that universities should require ethics clearance for writers who use material from lived experience, but that authors should consider the ethical implications of the research (both fact-checking and knowledge-producing) and how it might impact on the individuals who they come across in the course of their "lifetime" of research.

Also, there's the ethics of representation involved in the novel writing process to be considered. That is, what are the ethical implications if I write about Argentina without researching Argentina and readers assume my version to be a faithful account? Or indeed, what are the ethical implications of Morgan's descriptions of Aboriginal Australia? Is this the kind of thing universities could require ethics clearance for? Should realist novelists in the academy be forced to consider how their work might affect perception of the events/places/people being described? The idea sounds onerous, especially in a system where writers struggle for writing time amidst administrative and teaching responsibilities. And perhaps there already is an imperative to research and represent responsibly: publication. One could argue writers care about researching their subject material for the self-interested reason that they don't want to get caught out by readers. As Kingsolver says:

> I almost never set a fictional scene in a place unless I've been there. Fiction is an accumulation of details, and if they're wrong, it's an accumulation of lies. Readers are not fooled. Fiction is invention but it's ultimately about truth (2014: 1).

The better known a book, the more heightened the scrutiny. Take, for example, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* and the spiralling, passionate blog discussions on Goodreads with relation to her inconsistencies. As reader 'Tim' states (2014: 1):

> Here are just a few of the things that had not been invented or popularized in 1999 which she continually makes reference to:
>   iPod -- 2002
>   texting -- 2000
>   iPhone -- 2007
>   camera phone -- 2004 maybe
>   GPS in automobiles -- mid-2000s
>   Survivor -- fall, 2000
>   American Idol -- 2002
>   Blackberry -- just introduced in 1999
> As for the fact that it's a novel the author can do whatever she feels like -- sure if she wants to make a point about technology or wants to be humorous a la *Blazing Saddles*. But, no, the author is wanting us to accept it as realism. Imagine writing a book about Henry VIII and having him drive a car!

The point here is that novel writers will have to face an ethics board of their own: their readership. Rigorous readers hold writers accountable for their texts. This isn't to say that we should not consider the role of

research and ethics within the academy or that readers will always be correct, but rather that it's important to acknowledge the many ways of safeguarding representational integrity with regard to realist texts.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued there are at least two kinds of research frequently involved in writing realist literary fiction within the tertiary context; fact-checking and the production of new knowledge. It has also argued that fact-checking research can inform the research of producing new knowledge, and that because of reader assumptions with regard to realism, novelists of this genre should consider how they fact-check and how this fact-checking informs their creative research. In conclusion, I would ask fiction writers to consider the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research that states:

> All human interaction, including the interaction involved in human research, has ethical dimensions. However, 'ethical conduct' is more than simply doing the right thing. It involves acting in the right spirit, out of an abiding respect and concern for one's fellow creatures (2007, 2014: 3).

Vollman might well argue that masturbating in front of prostitutes was the ethical way to conduct his research—that he was "acting in the right spirit" to allay their fear and misery. I'd argue he was trying to access the information needed to write a good story. Of course these two goals aren't mutually exclusive—but as writers we need to think about how research is conducted and how that research informs our work.

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CHAPTER TWO

THRESHOLDS OF INNOVATION:
CONCEPTUALISING IMAGINATIVE WRITING
AND FICTION BIOGRAPHY

JAMES VICARS

In her recent, wide-ranging survey of innovation in the biographical field, Donna Brien points out that while biography is widely understood as "a literature that tells straightforward, factual stories of lives as written by someone else", it continues, paradoxically, "to be the site of considerable experimentation" (2014: 2). But having catalogued some of the most interesting and influential of these at length, she notes that, despite the acknowledgement of creative construction, debates continue over the validity of experiment and innovation in biography and that

> [i]nevitably, perhaps, these debates repeat main threads of argument. The first positions biographical fact as being allied to 'truth', while any invention/innovation is, therefore, inevitably related to fiction and, therefore, falsity. The second is to ally conventional forms and practices with ideas of 'solid' history, fact and truth (and 'good' biography), meaning that any experimentation or innovation is understood as leading to falsity, manipulation, underhandedness and a degradation of the form (Brien 2014: 4).

While engaging the threads of argument that Brien refers to is not my purpose here, they appear to displace an increasingly large body of work that is recognisably biographical and often embodies a similar breadth of research, but that is imaginatively written or entirely (or in part) presented *as* fiction. Brien acknowledges the work of narratively focused British biographers including Peter Ackroyd, Victoria Glendinning, Michael Holroyd, Hilary Spurling and Andrew Motion (whose "openly fictionalised" *Wainewright the Poisoner* (2000) she treats at length) and points to others such as poet Stephen Scobie's semi-fictional *And Forget*

My Name: A Speculative Biography of Bob Dylan (1999).

However, there are many others who explicitly write lives through the imagination and as fiction, and a tiny sampling might range from the stylish fictions about writers such as Henry James in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2005) and David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004), and Sylvia Plath in Kate Moses' *Wintering* (2003) and Emma Tennant's *Sylvia and Ted* (2001), to popular depictions such as that of little-known early palaeontologist Mary Anning by Tracy Chevalier in *Remarkable Creatures* (2009). Australian examples range from Ernestine Hill's *My Love Must Wait* (1941), about Matthew Flinders, to Marele Day's extensive imagining of "the Captain's Wife" in *Mrs Cook* (2002) and Sonia Orchard's *The Virtuoso*, about Australian-born pianist Noël Mewton-Wood (2009). Together with these, I place a work of my own, provisionally entitled the *Fortunes of Millicent Bryant, aviator* (Vicars 2014) that writes the life of Australia's first woman aviator as fictional biography. This work provides a practice-based research perspective as the second part of an approach to conceptualising the use of imaginative writing and fiction in the biographical field. The framework is presented here in outline, with the focus briefly on its first component, the theoretical base, before dwelling on the second more fully and demonstrating the intertwining of the two. A survey and analysis of published works, while not included in this discussion, is the final component.

Writing a life has always involved a degree of subjectivity in its construction, even if that is little more than a bare placement of facts. During the re-invigoration of biography in the 1920s and 30s, perspectives on this practice, including the use of imaginative writing, were debated by Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, André Maurois, Harold Nicholson and others; these issues have been taken up more recently by writers such as Robert Skidelsky, Richard Holmes, Ray Monk and Susan Tridgell. [1] While Ira Nadel (1984) perhaps provided the first systematic attempt at a poetics of biography that incorporated imaginative innovations, fictional biography as a term and an area of scholarly study was established by Ina Schabert in her seminal 1990 monograph on this subject, *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography*. In developing a theoretical basis for the use of fiction as biography, illustrated with in-depth case studies, this work also concurs with the proposition that, rather than there being authoritatively objective biographies, there can only be approaches to biography that situate themselves in a discourse of objectivity and utilise its methodologies and formats.

This is not to claim that all biography should be thought of as fiction (nor to get caught in questions of either inadvertent or deliberate untruth,

which is, for this discussion, an entirely separate question), but to avoid the positioning of fictional biography as a binary *opposite* to nonfiction biography. While such opposites tend to fall apart when placed under a lens such as that of deconstruction, we can also observe that all biography sets out with some initial story, factual or otherwise, which is then researched, broadened, formed more fully and shaped by a variety of personal and extrinsic factors; however, a particular challenge is to find an approach that permits expression of—to employ Virginia Woolf's famed distinction—both the "granite-like" and that of "rainbow-like tangibility" in the life and that enables these to act as loci of understanding about the subject person rather than being in binary conflict.[2]

Fictional biography as Ina Schabert defines it aspires to such aims, and her case does not flinch from the term fictional: it is the adjective or modifier of the noun "biography", the term that announces its primary purpose. Schabert argues that it is because of the "centrality of the real-life orientation in the works in question" that fictional biography must be considered, moreover, "a special kind of 'biography' rather than a sub-genre of the novel" (1990: 4). It is, she says:

> respect for the documentary evidence referring to the other person [that] distinguishes them [fictional biographers] from novelists proper whereas they share with the latter confidence in the imagination as a truthful principle for the selection, organization and interpretation of the materials (1990: 48).

But if the nearest form of fiction to fictional biography is still the novel, how should it be employed? On one hand, this might mean that a life finds its counterpart in the characters, time sequence, social norms and plot of a realist novel; on the other, Schabert considers that fictional biography subverts these conventions and structures in order to be true to the knowing of the subject person, which is its purpose. In this respect, she argues a closer kinship with the authors who created the psychological novel or "novel of consciousness", saying that they have prepared the way for those who write fictional biographies through their preoccupation with probing the mystery of a person as existential identity (1990: 38). The defining feature is, then, that fictional biography aims neither at a set of psychological and moral generalisations nor at ontological truth. Rather,

> [e]ach specimen of the genre tries to comprehend the subjective being of one, ungeneralizable person and to convey the unique through the relation of the particular contiguities of the person's life and through an ideographic style (Schabert 1990: 112).

Therefore, she argues, fictional biography stands distinct from pure fiction as a mode that follows its own creative inclinations, or is ultimately concerned with the patterning of plot or character: it is subject to the life in question. Of course, continual evolution and experimentation suggest that forms other than the psychological novel written in first person may also be able to meet Schabert's condition; the postmodern novel, for example, construed as part of this continuum of experimentation, plays with language, blurs reality and invention, disrupts its own form, and references itself and other fictional works. Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrott* (1992) is a relevant example. My own fictional biography, while utilising a substantially realist approach, also crosses the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction by entwining authentic source material from the letters of Millicent Bryant with the fictional narrative. Letters become conversation, for example. Doing so created an alternative path by which to chart Millicent's inner course, while maintaining the work's orientation to the service of biography—rather than fiction—as its primary enterprise.

Thus, while picking up a fictional biography and asking "is it true?" may seem redundant, it remains a relevant question; proof of its veracity may be less obvious than in a nominally nonfiction biography, but the question of whether or not its main objective is the truth of the subject person is still central. Compared to its nonfiction counterpart, though, it is perhaps more incumbent on the reader to make a judgment, to "mind the gap" and to ascertain whether the alternative passage of a fictional biography brings them closer, or adds to the truth of the subject person. This may not be a new kind of journey for readers of fiction, but it may be for readers of nonfiction biography. They will find, for example, that gaps can be fluid in their width, such as in the case of Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990). This work not only moves between memoir and biography, but some parts—such as Poppy's diaries—are fictionalised. The writing, as Modjeska says, took her into "a reimagined past, rich with detail, at once a gift of imagination and held in a bedrock that I don't think I can call truth but is related to truth" (Modjeska 2002: 74). What is apparent with this book is that reimagining the past is what made it possible for her mother, as Poppy, to appear vividly and authentically—truthfully. Conversely, but closer to the other side of the gap, Kate Grenville's 2005 novel, *The Secret River*, was wrought from the life of her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman; in this case, though, it draws from the man but the book is not "about" him *per se*, showing her approach to fall on the side of fiction rather than biography. Finally, if there is a work that falls into the gap itself rather than on either side, it might be Edmund Morris's controversial *Dutch, a memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999), in which the

fabrications, perhaps unintentionally, slipped from their author's grasp over the course of the 14 years it took for the book to be completed.

Considering these examples, it is apparent that judgments *are* possible and, thus, that conceptualising imaginative writing as biography is practicable, tying in with the second as well as the first component of the framework which I have proposed. My own writing, while providing a further illustrative example, also represents practice as a site for research and experiment that intertwines with the conceptual base and the other works in the field.

My project came into being because of a family-inspired interest in the life of Millicent Bryant, a "woman of many parts" who became Australia's first female aviator early in 1927—as well as one of the most notable victims of the *Greycliffe* maritime disaster at the end of the same year. The project began as a biographical one, with conventional approaches and expectations, but was soon struck with discontinuities between the lack of evidence for the early part (indeed the large majority) of her life compared to that available, mainly in the form of a letters collection and newspaper reports, for the two years at its end.

But while the historical gap between writer and subject person would seem to increase the possible discontinuities, I was able, by writing in fiction, to develop a sense of proximity and real-life orientation to Millicent's experiences. This was the case even with her earlier life, as its paucity of information allowed me greater scope in imagining around the facts. An example is her courtship and wedding, about which nothing is known but the date and a crucial sentence or two in a local newspaper. However, it seems all but certain that she met her husband to be, Edward (Ned) Bryant, in Manly while assisting her mother with the "sea-bathing" that was the suggested treatment for the polio afflicting her brother George. While a little was known about the Bryants' lives in Manly, such as where they lived, when they died and where they were buried, the social pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1897 happened to report in some detail a birthday party of Ned's younger brother, Charles (who become a noted war artist), that I utilised and turned into the meeting with Millicent. Something like this is not unlikely to have happened; it became, then, the entry point for the development of the story of this part of her life: from it, several incidents were then developed which fitted around this one fragment of personal evidence together with the much greater expanse of material recorded about Manly and its environs at the turn of the century.

I also drew on the later letters (1925–1927) to create a way through which Millicent's written words to her son John (who was overseas at the time) could help tell the story of her own life. This went through two quite

different phases but the first involved making these letters to John an integral part of the narrative, turning comments or observations in letters, her diaries or statements in newspaper stories into actions or spoken incidents. For example, I turned her notes for a speech into the *actual* speech that she was preparing for but for which there is no factual record; I also used both the details and actual words in her travel diary to construct the story of her trip to England in 1911. In addition, I featured some of Millicent's own handwritten fragments in the text, usually without captions, in order to reflect feelings or incidents that come into the narrative. This provided a method of exposing the reader directly to Millicent and making her presence stronger, emphasising the roots of the work in her own writings.

Although this was not the final form the writing took, the innovation from this part of my practice can be summarised as a kind of "reverse engineering" in which my story of Millicent's earlier life could be created and given shape by the evidence, in the letters and associated fragments, of her later personality. The notable benefit of this method was in supporting a *consistency* of persona, though it also supplied ideas for appropriate additions to the story that could flesh out her life in an authentic way.

This demonstrates how a fictional account may be able to build credible biographical depth through a creative approach that works with and respects the evidence. However, it is complemented, or balanced, by writing from my own subjective and personal understandings, the base I developed for the imagination of Millicent's personal reality. This is an example of the subjective engagement and "truthful principle for the selection, organization and interpretation of the materials" to which Ina Schabert refers (1990: 48).

These depended on understanding my personal relationship with Millicent as an awareness vital to my creation of the narrative. While this is a non-rational process at one level (and for all biographers), writing in fiction encourages its nuanced and reasoned development; in this respect, Paul Ricoeur's exploration of the dialectic of "self" and "the other than self" is helpful in suggesting that we can know "an other" in a similar way that we know our own self (1992: 2-3). In the present context, this suggests an awareness of a complex framework of "like-ness" with other humans that we grow up with and that operates at many levels. The deepest motivation for reading as well as writing biographical works might therefore be to find or see this "like-ness": the underlying appeal might be simply the demonstration that "other" *is* 'like self' in its intelligibility.

Fictional biography appears well suited to engaging with such notions, and exploring my own "likeness" with Millicent enabled me to creatively