University of New England

James Vicars

Discarding the disclaimer? Reappraising fiction as a mode of biography

Abstract
While the biographical novel has created an openness to representing lives in fiction it is usually expected to provide a disclaimer certifying the work's unreliability despite its potential for truth-telling and rich tools for writers wishing to tell the stories of real people. Even so, more serious attention to the historical novel since Lukács, the impact of the postmodern novel, plus the variety of published works that have adopted fictional strategies to tell lives over the last half century suggest this perspective is shifting. Using Ina Schabert's seminal work on fictional biography as a scholarly reference point, this paper explores fiction's biographical capacity, turning to published works and personal writing practice to try to reappraise the potential of fiction as a mode of biography.
Keywords: biographical novel, fictional biography, Ina Schabert

Introduction

The ubiquity of works utilizing various modes of fiction to explore the lives of real people, alive or dead, is unremarkable in the twenty-first century, especially following the emergence in the twentieth of the biographical novel or fictional biography [1] as a literary phenomenon on several continents. Heralded by the novels of Irving Stone, it fully arrived in the 1960s in the United States following the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, with the genre achieving mature prominence by the end of the twentieth century when Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Russell Banks' *Cloudsplitter* vied for the Pulitzer Prize (Lackey 2014: 9-10). In the UK, Robert Graves' *I, Claudius* brought it to notice in 1934, eventually culminating in Hilary Mantel's triumphs with the Man Booker Prize in 2009 and 2012 for her stories of the life of Thomas Cromwell. In Australia, Ernestine Hill's *My love must wait*, about cartographer Matthew Flinders, was published in 1941; some sixty years later, Peter Robb won the Australian National Biography Award for *M*, *a biography of European painter Caravaggio.* There are many more: the growth in the publication of such works, as well as their success, has expanded the field of fiction.

A less examined question, however, is their impact on the field of biography. The idea of fiction as an actual mode of biography has not, until very recently, attracted serious academic attention even though the use of fiction in the writing of lives is a relatively common and even favoured tool: Australian writer Kate Grenville, for instance, acknowledged its importance to her own bio-memoir in a talk (Grenville 2015a) shortly after the publication of *One Life: My Mother's story* (Grenville2015b) last year. Here, fictional writing woven with factual narrative enabled 'an act of great imaginative sympathy' that helped to create 'an intimate account of the patterns in her mother's life'

(Text Publishing 2015). Even so, fiction as a mode of biography has no accepted genre niche and Brien's 2014 discussion of biographic forms distinguishes these from fiction *per se*: that is, fiction *itself* is not included as a biographic form (Brien 2014).

However, discussion and scholarship is beginning to emerge in different directions. This journal, *TEXT*, devoted a special issue to fictional histories and historical fictions in April, 2015 (Nelson & de Matos 2015b), and a cluster of essays on biofiction has been featured in the first issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* for 2016. In one of these, 'The Rise of the Biographical Novel and the Fall of the Historical Novel', Michael Lackey concludes that the fact that the biographical novel is more fictional than biographical 'does not minimize the role of the biographical'. It just means, he writes, 'that we, as scholars, have a lot of work ahead of us in order to clarify the nature, role, and function of the biographical within the biographical novel' (Lackey 2016: 54). It is by way of such work that I wish to look past the 'either/or' of genre distinctions and to consider a selection of writings beyond the rubric of 'is it biography *or* is it fiction?'. Rather, by adopting a more discursive perspective involving both argument and reappraisal I will be seeking to expand the conversation in terms of not just whether but *how* fiction can be biography.

Peter Robb's *M* is one possible starting point. When shortlisted for the National Biography Award in 2000, Robb contrarily refused to describe his dramatic study of the artist Caravaggio's life and death as biographical, and acknowledged his need to fill large gaps in the documentation by speculating on what might have happened (Wyndham 2000: 12). 'It's an identikit picture of the man rather than a scholarly biography', he commented after winning the award. 'Conventional biography tends to accumulate the external facts but take the art, the inner life, for granted. It dodges the crucial questions about why this person created this art.' (Knox 2000: 3). While his book ticked boxes for the award by providing a third person narrative and extensive research, it also brought Caravaggio to life, as one reviewer noted, through Robb's ability to create 'the everyday atmosphere of palazzos and tennis courts; their air of indolence and danger; the street corner subcultures of a world in which beauty and brutality, the grotesque and the exquisite, rubbed cheek to cheek' (Culturecrammer 2009). Painting around Caravaggio as it were, Robb merged a partly-known historical world with the mostly unrecorded and thus explicitly imagined day-to-day actions and feelings of his subject. A distinctive aspect of this narrative is the use of a grungy, Australian-inflected vernacular to give his portrayal of Caravaggio an edgy, authentic presence. Though dividing UK critics, it was a commercial success.

If it seems ironic that a biographical work can be given its due while arrayed in the clothing of fiction, Hilary Mantel's recent books provide a reference point from the other side of the spectrum. Despite their combination of detailed research and fine writing in the recreation of the life of a historical figure, these achievements were little acknowledged in biographical terms. Instead, the *New York Times*' Charles McGrath wrote that it was 'the English past' that 'comes to seem like something vivid, strange and brand new' (McGrath 2012), while Sir Peter Stothard, Chair of the Man Booker judges, asserted that 'our greatest modern writer retells the origins of modern England' and has 'rewritten the rules for historical fiction' (Booker Prize Foundation 2012). Almost as easily, however, the acclaim, could have been heaped on Mantel for creating a brilliantly animated, biographical portrayal: Scottish writer John Burnside said that to describe *Wolf Hall* 'as a historical novel is like calling *Moby-Dick* a book on fishing' (Burnside 2009).

This suggests that, while the Man Booker judges obviously focused on *Wolf Hall* and its sequel as fiction, this identification operated to limit or exclude recognition of the books' possible qualities as biography. It is a reminder that writers who openly employ the imagination in writing a life must contend with expectations that they provide a disclaimer certifying their work's unreliability, rather than its potential for truth-telling, and Mantel follows this practice. However, writing in the author's note in *Bring Up the Bodies* that she was not claiming authority for her version, she instead says that she is 'making the reader a proposal, an offer' (2009: 406). While this is a more precise and confident expression of purpose than Peter Robb's self-deprecating comments, both writers are taking care to cover any sharp edges of their creations against careless handling by critics. Indeed, when accepting the National Biography Award, Robb referred to the adverse reactions from some critics in the UK [2], arguing that it was his unusual tone that had enraged them because it was 'an offence against decorum' (Knox 2000: 3). Perhaps, however, Robb was seeking to draw fire away from the 'offence' he seemed less keen to address: his work's challenge to (and thus exposure to criticism from) conventional genre understandings and the notions of 'authority' that Mantel acknowledged.

This situation appears to be unexceptional in the broad field of biographical novels and, again, ironic that even those who are highly acclaimed feel constrained to be apologetic about the biographical value of their works. In the absence of recognition for such qualities, not only is the descriptor 'biographical' largely evacuated of meaning but a potentially vital dimension of the work and its contribution to understanding its subject may be passed over. However, it is the very efficacy of fiction, and of fine writing in particular in the exploration of lives, that prevents this issue being summarily dismissed. Ruth Scurr wrote in the *TLS* in 2012 that while Hilary Mantel did not dismiss the distinction between fact and fiction, 'her imagination issues a powerful challenge to what in other circumstances – a sermon, a lecture, a textbook, a standard historical work – might be presented as authoritatively true' (Scurr 2012). In other words, the quality of Mantel's imaginative effort is itself an argument for wider recognition of such works and, in this respect, prompts the need for a discussion that would help to enlarge what Thomas Couser calls a 'critical vocabulary' for 'exploring what genres are in order to understand what they do' (Couser 2005: 155). Thus, my aim in what follows is not to revisit, in the context of biography, disputes with history and nonfiction (or to extol fiction *per se*) but to focus on the capacity of the biographical novel or fictional biography to write a life. This will be aided by consideration of a number of published works and reflections from my own recent writing practice. In doing so, it may be possible to normalise a situation in which the capacity of the imagination to represent an actual life in fiction can be better understood and acknowledged without requiring that works define themselves by a disclaimer or that they first answer the question suspended above them like an executioner's axe: can fiction be biography, or biography fiction?

The historical novel vis-à-vis the biographical novel

I have outlined elsewhere (Vicars 2016) some of the reasons writers might choose fiction in biographical writing in preference to other modes, from nonfiction biography to literary nonfiction and historiographic metafiction. This overlaps with the present discussion, and while I will revisit (and perhaps repeat) some points if relevant, my purpose in both settings has not been to dwell on the novel as a form or the biographical novel as a particular instance of that form – these are enormously broad subjects. That said, I conceive of the novel both as cultural *praxis* and *poïesis*, (broadly) a product and a practice that

in this context may re-present, make or remake lives using various narrative tropes and in which 'story' has a variety of purposes and meanings [3]. In so doing it has formed and encompassed many styles from the realist to the postmodern and, in showing renewed interest in realist conventions and 'authenticity' (see Haselstein et al 2010: 19), continues to exhibit its suitability for the telling of lives. This has often taken place within the broad church of the historical novel, and it is arguably from here that the biographical novel has now emerged more fully.

This 'parentage' provides further reasons to consider these forms face to face. Since Lukács influentially attributed 'the longing to escape from the triviality of modern bourgeois life' to producing the interest in historical themes and movements (Lukács 1962: 229), the historical novel gained a measure of respectability to which the emergent postmodern historical novel added further weight. Martha Rozett writes that Umberto Eco's *Postscript* four years after publication of *The Name of the Rose* proclaims the authority of serious historical fiction by pointing out that while characters in a historical novel may not appear in encyclopedias, everything they do could only occur in that time and place (Rozett 1996: 145). Eco himself holds that, in such reimaginings of the past, the novelist is performing the analytical role of the historian by 'not only identify[ing] in the past the causes of what came later, but also trac[ing] the process through which those causes began slowly to produce their effects' (Eco 1984: 76). It follows that postmodern historical fiction, with devices such as narrative intrusions, questions and other means of interrupting the fictional construction, including drawing attention to the fragmented nature of the evidence, creates a sense of 'historicity' and thus gains a certain authority. It is this historicity, Rozett says, that blurs the boundaries between context (or setting) and foreground (or characterisation) in ways analogous to the critical practices of the new historicists (Rozett 1996: 157).

As a relevant example, Stephen Greenblatt's acclaimed *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (2005) combines highly tuned historical sensibilities with an unconventional, imaginative writing approach – indeed, it could be said, his approach asserts the importance of the imagination. Critics such as Colin Burrows in the *London Review of Books* fulminated that '[t]his kind of biographical fiction might seem an extraordinary thing for a critic as intelligent as Greenblatt to have attempted', adding acidly that 'the superstar critic dances out his desire for the megastar author, courting him, imagining him, loving him' (Burrows 2005: 9-11). But as *Will in the World* is still founded on scholarship of great (if at times controversial) depth, the real argument may be that what is woven from Greenblatt's contextual and anecdotal fabric does amount to characterisation – and that adding imaginative scenes to the traditionally hazy portraiture of Shakespeare's life in this way is a bridge too far for the historiographic sensibilities around this particular subject.

Despite this reaction, work such as Greenblatt's illustrates convergences with those using fiction as the primary means of exploring the life of an actual, historical person. While few have the celebrity of Greenblatt, their research is usually taken just as seriously; in this respect it also suggests, analogous to the notion of 'historicity', that their works display what could be called 'biographicity' – with the modification that the subjects of fictional biographies or biographical novels *can* be found in dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Such biographicity is most easily recognised in hybrid works such as Steven Scobie's *And Forget My Name: A Speculative Biography of Bob Dylan* (1999) or Andrew Motion's *Wainewright the Poisoner* (2000), which employs a mode of 'fiction-beside-biography' to place fictional confession parallel to an eclectic historical and contemporary commentary. Others, though less successful in

negotiating the tensions of fiction and nonfiction, at least according to some critics, include Norman Mailer's *Marilyn: A Biography* in 1973 and Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A memoir of Ronald Reagan* in 1999. A range of other works, such as Brian Matthews' *Louisa* in 1987 and Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1990), incorporate fictional sections that have not prevented their recognition as nonfiction biography.

However, it is the writing of a life fully in fiction that most challenges notions of biography relying on 'either/or' distinctions and where 'biographicity' and other qualities may be most important. Works in this category offer the required disclaimer via the subtitle 'a novel' or through an authorial note to satisfy their publisher's marketing needs and to avoid the arguments outlined earlier. Apart from Hilary Mantel's prize-winning productions, notable examples range from the stylish, biographical fictions of literary figures such as Henry James (David Lodge with *Author, Author* in 2004 and Colm Tóibín with *The Master* in 2005), Sylvia Path (Emma Tennant's *Sylvia and Ted* in 2001 and Kate Moses' *Wintering* in 2003), Leo Tolstoy and Walter Benjamin (both by Jay Parini in *The Last Station* in 1990 and *Benjamin's Crossing* in 1996 respectively), celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe (Joyce Carol Oates with *Blonde* in 1999) and politicians and statesmen (Gore Vidal's *Burr* in 1973 and *Lincoln* in 1984) through to popular depictions of lesser known figures such as Tracy Chevalier's *Remarkable Creatures*, about early paleontologist Mary Anning, in 2009. There are great historical figures, such as Roman emperors Claudius and Hadrian (Robert Graves' *I, Claudius* in 1934 and Marguerite Yourcenar's remarkable *Memoirs of Hadrian* in the 1950s) and revolutionary Simón Bolívar (*The General in his Labyrinth* by García Márquez in 1989); there are also obscure ones, including wives of the 'great' such as the poet Milton's first wife, Marie, in Robert Graves' *Wife to Mr. Milton* (1943) and 'the Captain's Wife' in Marele Day's *Mrs Cook* (2002). Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) has perhaps overshadowed Robert Drewe's intense but slimmer portrait of Ned Kelly, *Our Sunshine*, published in 1991. *The Black Dress: Mary MacKillop's Early Years* (2010) by Pamela Freeman and *Pennies for Hitler* by Jackie French (2012), even won the NSW History Prize for Young People, prompting Hsu-Ming Teo to invite us 'to consider why adult historical fiction should be evaluated with such different standards and expectations' (Teo 2015: 18).

These are some better-known examples of writing in which fiction has provided a vehicle for the telling of lives – as well as that lives have become a vehicle for fictional purposes. It is obviously to allow for this possibility that biographical novels and fictional biographies are expected to provide the disclaimer and acquiesce to the reductive *either* fiction *or* biography, discounting their potential for biographical authenticity and truthful portrayal at the outset. This is despite the distinctions being of dubious rigidity: works such as Peter Ackroyd's 'fiction-within-nonfiction' *Dickens*, Matthews' *Louisa* and Motion's *Wainewright* cross boundaries from the nonfiction side in different ways, suggesting that the logic for excluding 'fiction-as-biography' is not really about the use of fiction as such. Rather, it might be a means of avoiding the analytical unease that Nigel Hamilton expressed when he wrote that while biography has become, in the West, the dominant area of broadcasting and non-fiction publishing, from television to the internet, 'it is now one of the embattled front lines in the struggle between society's notions of truth and imagination' (Hamilton 2007: 3). While such remarks can be contested and perhaps over-dramatise the pressure to maintain fixed positions for biography, history and truth, the works referred to above indicate that the front lines were breached some time ago, and that writing employing the imagination to explore real lives has found a contemporary readership alongside other forms in the biographical field.

Acknowledgment of this reality has already taken place through a considered set of ideas aimed at understanding and theorising the use of fiction in biography articulated by Ina Schabert in her seminal 1990 study, *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as biography.* As she defines it, fictional biography 'is engaged in the comprehension of a real historical individual by means of the sophisticated instruments of knowing and articulating knowledge that contemporary fiction offers' (Schabert 1990: 4). This is based on the writers' understanding that what is 'rainbow-like' (to employ Virginia Woolf's famous distinction) about their subjects cannot be fully observed or deduced in the same way as that which is 'granite-like' (Woolf 1958: 149) – rather, it adds to evidential and analytical insights a trust in 'knowing' the person subjectively and imaginatively:

> The genre acknowledges imagination – a disciplined and well-informed imagination – as the medium of interpersonal knowing. Thus is established, on a new level, the indispensable conviction that communication is possible: a community of comprehension between author and reader with reference to the person who is the subject of the fictional biography supplies the model for the reader's act of understanding the author. (Schabert 1990: 47)

But at the same time as it suggests ways of knowing and writing the subject beyond the processes of nonfiction, fictional biography should still remain connected to the person as they are conventionally known and in the particularity of their circumstances. These are not to be changed to better fit fictional purposes: 'narrative conventions are rejected as generalizations that work against the purpose of giving expression to real, unique personhood', Schabert asserts (1990: 32). Critically, then, fictional biography as defined here remains true to the idiosyncratic character of the subject person's otherness and unique circumstances.

This said, the work is otherwise in the hands of the writer, and judgment may be required as to whether the 'knowing' of the subject person has been subordinated to the creative development of the work or not. While this is perhaps the most subtle and problematic aspect of distinguishing fictional biography from 'pure' fiction, it does not mean that writers of fictional biography *cannot* walk a fine line with their narrative or their creative inventions – or, equally, that readers are incapable of discrimination. An indication of faithfulness to a biographical subject might be by ensuring, for example, that all known, accepted facts are respected, with readers discerning this by drawing on their existing background knowledge (including from other biographical works) or aided by paratextual indications the writer may choose to provide such as notes on sources [4]. As well, if Schabert's measure for recognising a work as fictional biography is that the shape of its narrative is true to the unique, idiosyncratic movement of the subject's life rather than a trajectory determined by fiction *per se,* readers can utilise such questions as: is fiction the form, or is it the objective of the work? 'Does the work realise biographical truth in terms of both fact and the person?' to assist their judgments. These require reflection and do not guarantee certainty, but they offer some base criteria that, with use and refinement, would provide the means for developing generic recognition of such works. This opens the way to an increased appreciation of their biographical value that reliance on a disclaimer might otherwise forestall.

A perspective from practice can be gained from my own recent writing of the life of Millicent Bryant, Australia's all-but-forgotten first woman pilot (Vicars 2013a). I chose to write her life as fictional biography because of the brevity of

her fame, the unbalanced nature of the historical sources, and because I sought to understand her inner motivations in the context of her time in a way that I felt only the exploratory power of fiction would permit. However, the particularity of the factual circumstances and available evidence came prior to, and underlay, the portrait of her that I developed imaginatively; creating fictional biography allowed an accretion of imagined facts to those accepted to exist about her life without changing the latter. Within these parameters, my development of Millicent's story could range from circumstances only hinted at in the small but vital collection of her letters, such as the breakup of her marriage, to simpler but necessary connective transitions between events described in detail in the primary sources. In this way, I follow Schabert's emphasis and her adoption of William Styron's view that the imagination of the author writing a fictional biography is a 'responsible imagination', an imagination which 'as a rule respects the known facts, yet is free to interpret them, enlarge upon them and supplement them according to the certainties of the empathic act' (Schabert 1990: 147). Fictional biographies do this at the same time as sharing with nonfiction biography the systematic building of evidence and interpretation in their construction; these processes can, however, be conveyed through creative use of voice or with imaginative movements of narrative.

Such approaches provided a vital sense of scope for my writing of Millicent's life but the project was also supported by my awareness of the tension that, while needing to be informed and responsible, only the imagination is free enough to recover and recreate 'lost' stories, subjects and marginalised histories. Women's lives, especially, have fallen into that category and, being more frequently unrecorded, Susanna Scarparo says that 'their stories – if they are to be told – have to be invented. The stories of the invisible … can only exist through fiction' (Scarparo 2005: 90). Although Millicent might have been more visible than many, especially for a short time, she was invisible for much of her life.

Telling a life in works of fictional biography

While the range of twentieth and twenty-first century works that explore more or less well-known lives in fiction has been outlined above, the formative aspects of the writing perhaps exhibit themselves most clearly in postmodern fictional works. One fictional biography in which this praxis is particularly visible, and powerful, is Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (2004), based on the life of the Italian Baroque painter, Artemisia Gentileschi. Banti's novel offers a fictional dialogue, in which the painter herself is apparently consoling the author about the loss of a one hundred page fictional manuscript about Gentilischi. This story 'emphasises the role of writing and fiction in (re) creating historical memory', according to Susanna Scarparo, who adds that '[t]he effort to remember that which is lost – be that Artemisia's real history, Artemisia's fictional history, or women's history at large – becomes part of the narrative' (2005: 11,13). Banti's approach thus foregrounds processes of fictional biography that seem similar to my own: the relation of other to 'self', subjective as well as objective knowing, and the invention of the life in its narration. As Banti herself writes, 'we are playing a chasing game, Artemisia and I' (Banti 2004: 121).

By comparison, there is a different kind of chasing game in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1992) because Julian Barnes' acclaimed meta-fictional biography professes to get nowhere with the attempt to write about the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert. It appears to do the opposite of Sartre's attempt to grasp Flaubert in

his enormous *L'idiot de la famille* (Sartre 1981), indeed criticising the latter for trying to 'enclose and subdue the master writer' (Barnes 1992: 13). Working creatively in what Schabert calls an 'ambivalently negative mode' (1990: 206), Barnes brings together fragments, like a collage, multiple perspectives which, in enacting a kind of dialectical movement of their own, seem to be trying to show the impossibility of grasping a person in the past and, yet, offering myriad glimpses that, as it were, animate Flaubert in the quasi-fictional awareness of his narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite. While claiming to avoid any attempt at Sartre's totalisation, Barnes' achievement is of a more mosaic kind, and apparently aloof from the project of existentially knowing the other. The sense of a connection with Flaubert's remote otherness that Barnes declines to offer is not at all like, say, Robert Graves' sense and writing of Marie in his *Wife of Mr. Milton*, or my own. Yet there is still an obvious *inter esse,* an engagement of writer with subject in both objective and subjective terms, and a 'knowing' that can be sensed by readers. Though disclaiming that any 'knowing' has occurred, Barnes arguably delivers it as a glistening play of his character's thoughts and experiences, obliquely coming to grips with a sense of Flaubert *as* those thoughts and experiences. Schabert suggests that Barnes' 'negatives', 'which are all that is accessible to our experience, have to be taken as indications of a mysterious positive truth' (1990: 204); Braithwaite's apparent failure to find a way to engage with his subject's existence paradoxically opens, through the story of this 'failure', ways for the reader to engage with it.

An Australian example of partly fictional or hybrid biography with distinct similarities to Barnes' style include Brian Matthews' *Louisa,* which employs competing subjective and fictional voices to approach the life of the feminist, publisher and mother of Henry Lawson. *Louisa* might thus be described as polyphonic but, as with Barnes, the narratorial voices exert a powerful influence. These voices, representing the viewpoints of the author, the biographer and his imagined alter ego, Owen Stevens, have a certain schizophrenic quality in that they are at odds with each other, and the volume of their narrative threatens to drown out the whispers of Louisa that a reader might, perhaps, be trying to 'hear' within themselves. This is not to argue the point that, like Barnes, Matthews is working from a postmodern awareness that a unified sense of Louisa is an illusion and that the truth is fragmented and unfixed. But even if this is the only sense of Louisa that is truly available, it may confuse or overly complicate things for the reader; as one reviewer put it, '[t]he irony of the drama of different selves is that, like Dr Frankenstein, the author has indeed created a monster ... biography becomes gothic' (Docker 1989: 399). Yet the work nevertheless attempts a specifically personal rapprochement with Louisa Lawson, with each narrator adding their experiential or intellectual viewpoint, and this brings both objective and subjective approaches into view. Although it might have been more cohesive (and this might not have interfered with its overall movement), *Louisa* is still able to provide a resonant and insightful engagement with Louisa Lawson out of the narratorial tussle while gaining authority from its 'historicity'.

On the other hand, Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, as Helen Thomson notes, incorporates 'slippages between biography, autobiography and fiction' that Thomson believes Brian Matthews was eager to avoid (Thomson 1994: 27). Modjeska, reflecting on this subsequently herself, said that if *Poppy* ended up 'on a line between fact and fiction, between imagination and evidence', this was because it reflected 'the collapse of certainty that accompanied the events that led up to writing it'. Thus

> [i]n the struggle to write about the unhappiness of good-hearted people, to give narrative shape to the jumble of the past that

> pressed on me with my mother's death, I was drawn into fiction, away from my early assumption that I'd find the marrow in the papers I'd scooped up when we emptied the trunks in her attic. (Modjeska 2002: 72-73)

In writing about Millicent Bryant, I found myself in a similar position in regard to her letters. However, third person fiction offered me a way to write about Millicent beyond the letters and records while providing an alternative to the more risky approach of creating an inner world through first person narration. Modjeska, though, has the skill to play with a number of writing approaches at once, and while Thomson argues that the resulting slippages 'are precisely the gaps where Drusilla Modjeska's text offers its most suggestive meanings' (1994: 27), *Poppy*'s seamless entwining of the fictional, factual, biographical and autobiographical led Curthoys and Docker to describe itas belonging to a hybrid genre of life-writing that, because its works lack a system or set of conventions for indicating how the stories they tell may relate to any historical sources 'cannot enliven history; they must continue to stand, uneasily, outside it' (Curthoys & Docker 1996: 34).

While this statement is partly justified, in *Poppy*'s case, by the disclaimer at the beginning, it is premised on the rubric of set borderlines between history, fiction and biography. Modjeska, though, in her acknowledgements at the end of *Poppy*, refuses these separations: she says that to give up facts would have defeated the purpose with which she began but to be confined by them 'seemed to deny the fictional paradox of truthfulness' – a statement that vividly encapsulates a key strength of fiction and of fictional biography (Modjeska 1990: 327).

Susanna Scarparo, in her analysis of *Poppy* and other works as gendered metafiction, further challenges Curthoys and Docker's conclusion, asserting that 'there can be no unmediated recovery, discovery or recreation of women's lives: it is impossible to represent the past as it really was'. Instead, she argues, the authors of these works are dispensing with 'oppositional modes of thinking, and enact a dialogic relationship with the past and the present' (Scarparo 2005: 159). Thus, the works of fictional biography considered here illustrate and support the argument that fictional narration is itself a method of 'knowing' the subject. This may be particularly so with women's stories excluded from historical records which 'if they are to be told – have to be invented', as Scarparo asserts (90).

While gendered metafiction of the kind articulated by Linda Hutcheon (1988) perhaps provides a more obvious stage for this argument, works such as *Louisa* and *Poppy* achieve their effects using a combination of subjective as well as objective resources; the sense of uncertainty and flux in their narratives evokes the idiosyncratic movements of the life in the very way that helps define fictional biography as Schabert conceives it. But there seems no reason for this not to apply to 'lost' lives – and not only of women – imagined in less self-reflexive forms. Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* is not a postmodern work (it first appeared in the 1950s), but the force of its deeply researched and imagined 'ventriloquism' reaches for the 'lost' personal story of Hadrian in a way that is no less powerful while her accompanying commentary adds a robust historicity. Likewise, Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, though not positioned as either biography or history, reaches out to both – to the extent that historian Tom Griffiths said, 'we cannot now write the history of the Kelly outbreak without learning from the extraordinary ventriloquism of the novel' (Griffiths 2009: 74.9).

Yet the explicit claim for any historical or biographical veracity for *True History* was carefully sidestepped by the author, who allowed the book's provocative title to make the claim for him while publicly retaining the prerogative of the disclaimer as a defence. When pressured about its historical authenticity at the Brisbane Writers Festival, Carey refused to take the bait and simply said 'I made it up', an admission that Inga Clendinnen notes with satisfaction in her contribution to the 'history wars' (Clendinnen 2006: 32). But not only is Carey's comment more of a deflection in the face of interrogation, the point, according to Tom Griffiths, is what Carey *didn't* make up: Griffiths observes that the novel:

> is not only a reworking of a real historical person, it is also a conscious extrapolation of a real historical document [Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie letter']... The factual inventions in his novel are relatively trivial; what is more striking is his respect for the known past – he has imagined within and under the public record rather than in defiance of it. (Griffiths 2009: 74.9)

True History of the Kelly Gang thus shows the power of the fictional approach that Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) later highlighted more controversially: it appears to serve both the factual truth of the past (assuming there is agreement with Griffiths' assessment that Carey's factual inventions are indeed 'relatively trivial') as well as the broader truth of a historical person imagined in fiction. Carey's work should therefore be able to be recognised for its biographical achievement, even though perceptions of how biography should be understood at the time of writing, as well as his preference for the novel, make it unlikely that he entertained such an aspiration.

The use of fiction as an exploratory tool

Works by writers from AJA Symons to Marguerite Yourcenar indicate that writing fiction does not require abandoning historical perspectives or evidence but employs a different method of working with them. Hayden White, expanding on Michel de Certeau's notion that fiction is the repressed 'other' of historical discourse, argues that 'historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real – which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable' (White 2005: 147) [5]. While his view of historical discourse may be contested, White's perception of the alternative in terms of its interest in filling out the possible or imaginable (rather than staying within the limits of the available records) was consonant with the needs of my own particular project. Indeed, it was with something of this sensibility that I began writing Millicent's life as a story that was not defined by large gaps in the historical record and the absence of direct personal interaction with Millicent (who was dead more than eighty years previous). In this respect, my practice seemed to reflect the approach to the 'unassailable lacuna', missing subject or absent 'other' that de Certeau, writing about history and Foucauldian archaeology, found in the work of Martin Duberman and that he observed 'ceaselessly moves and misleads him ... or indeed *writes*' (de Certeau 2000: 34). Here, the lacuna prompts or becomes a driving force for the writing: de Certeau articulates it as 'the relation of the *logos* to the *archè*, a "principle" or "beginning" which is its other … [and] on which it is based, which makes it possible' (35). Such a lacuna had prompted me to begin writing in fiction and to conceive the *archè* or originary source in terms suggested by Paul Ricoeur, what I have called 'an other like self' with whom I could relate [6]. From this, a form or a personality that I could call 'Millicent' took shape in the writing.

These perspectives were helpful in understanding my practice and steering my engagement with my subject: that is, with both the historical Millicent, about whom it can be accepted that certain statements can be made from an objective or rational standpoint, and also with a subjective engagement by which I gathered a different sense of who Millicent might have been, and that was of a kind that did not set us apart on the basis of our different placements in historical time, our different genders, or family relationships. Such axes may underlie most purposeful writing, but the choice to write about a real person in fiction perhaps calls them more plainly into view. This engagement included holding and developing an awareness of Millicent as 'an other like self', an experience and practice of close connectiveness formed by part respectful awareness, part emotive and empathetic conversation, part unconscious presence and more, something that unfolded over time and still continues. It provided the impetus for the imaginative movement of Millicent's story as well as a focus that could ensure this movement would not be a random or fanciful one.

The story that developed was still just as connected to the source material as a nonfiction biography but could move beyond them. For example, I employed a technique of accretion, creating further incidents and dialogue around sparsely recorded actual events, especially in Millicent's child and young adulthood. This allowed me to explore the impact of the accidental deaths of several of her siblings for instance, lives as well as deaths that are barely recorded. I was also able to explore the growth of the trusting relationship Millicent evidently had with her father, Edmund Harvey, and imagine how, as the letters in her last two years reveal, she was motivated to learn from his business acumen to become a businesswoman herself. Where there was a recorded event or incident I sought to draw its particular story both from the evidence and to view it through the lens of my engagement with Millicent to plausibly explore what the records only hinted at. In one case, working from a newspaper report of a birthday party held for her future husband's younger brother in 1898, I developed a picture of how they met and how that meeting set the foundations for future events, including their unspoken-of parting twenty-five years later. In imagining the nature of that meeting, I drew on the indications of her later personality to characterise and explain the earlier one – a kind of reverse engineering. Creation of dialogue built more fully drawn relationships that helped to explain and characterize how Millicent felt about her sons and behaved with them. I evoked sensory experiences of horse riding as well as flying. While other narrative forms also work on some of these levels, I proceeded much further by employing an omniscient-intimate narrative viewpoint to explore the breadth of Millicent's experience: I wrote about her birth as well as her death, about her own child-bearing, her relationships and her thoughts.

While this use of fiction sought to recover a 'possible' Millicent, exploring personality through incidents and conversation and building verisimilitude, I also created constraints around this method in the interests of accuracy and authenticity. These aimed not to conflict with the historical record, to reflect regularly on what I created and to diarise what I had invented in terms of dialogue, incident and motivation. I reviewed this list periodically and looked for its own gaps, as much to motivate self-awareness in the writing process as to check on imaginative fancy and the interpretation of evidence. Another decision was also to avoid first person narration, other than if I quoted directly from her letters or in a very few stream of consciousness fragments. This was partly because I could not be sure of creating Millicent's voice in an authentic way; although the letters near the end of her life provide a sense of this voice, I could not be certain enough of the way she might have spoken in different periods of her life as well as the language she would have used. There may also

have been female sensibilities of that period expressed in speech that I did not know enough about to seek access to, either as 'an other' or as a man.

My own work does aim explicitly to be biographical and to tell a life not already known; it seeks to 'create' a biographical past based on a careful process of historical research and simultaneously to use this as a springboard for exploring Millicent's life. Although having to forego the claim to represent the past within the limitations of historical exactitude (though not its representation *per se*), fiction's advantage is that a broader exploration is then possible. It is not a novel, but turning what was 'known' about Millicent Bryant into fiction also seemed to remove barriers to drawing in, as it were, the 'not-known', the kinds of non-factual 'knowledge' that could help create a story of her life that was as rich, plausible and 'true' as I could make it.

Conclusions

Biographical novels or fictional biographies, as examples from the work of well-known writers and reflections from my own practice have shown, thus have identifiable methodologies that enable them to explore their subjects. These perhaps indicate ways fictional biography can explain itself, how it can show that it does incorporate 'a system or set of conventions for indicating how the stories they tell may relate to any historical sources', to return to Curthoys and Docker's terms (1996: 34).

On one hand, postmodern biographical novels/fictional biographies, by interrupting the continuum of fiction and exposing the fragmentary nature of 'reality', incorporate a historicity or biographicity that arguably provides such a convention. At the same time, fiction and the imagination provide their own conventions and unique capacities for exploring lives, perhaps contained in the 'offer' that Mantel refers to and also part of a larger discussion of fiction that requires further exploration. Thus, while a disclaimer still might be chosen as a way to signal authorial positioning, its expected insertion as a way of constraining recognition of biographical as well as historical works written in fiction might be doing both readers and writers a disservice. If the use of fiction in published works shows readers are increasingly familiar and comfortable with input from the imagination, there is perhaps a wider shift in perspective that resonates with Nelson and de Matos's cautious observation on the possible reconceptualisation of history as a literature that 'it is not always entirely clear what … [that] might entail' (Nelson & de Matos 2015a: 1). This could apply equally to biography.

Notes

[1] While my own practice has been to utilise the term 'fictional biography' following Ina Schabert's framing of this form in her seminal 1990 monograph, I recognise the increasing prevalence of 'biographical novel' as a near-equivalent (though not identical) term which may be clearer to the non-specialist. return to text

[2] The UK critics' comments are well summarized by Stephen Moss's article in the *Guardian* of 9 February 2000 (Moss 2000). return to text

[3] In this respect I would observe that there is no biography existing somewhere on its own without its being formed or narrated. Biography is the

result of what I conceive of as 'storying': without story, there is no biography [see Vicars (2013b: 31)]. return to text

[4] This is the approach I have taken. However, a very fine example of notes on sources is provided in Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. return to text

[5] White adds the clarification that '[a] simply true account of the world based on what the documentary record permits one to talk about what happened in it at particular times and places can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what "reality" consists of' (White 2005: 147). Michel de Certeau writes that history can always seek, further and further back, what is 'within the "real" that legitimizes representation but is not identical to it'. Thus 'historians can write only by combining within their practice the "other" that moves and misleads them and the real that they can only represent through fiction' (de Certeau 2000: 35). return to text

[6] The notion of 'an other like self' comes from the work of philosopher Paul Ricoeur who argues that 'self' from the Latin *ipse* (rather than *idem*) 'involves a dialectic complementary to that of selfhood and sameness, namely the dialectic of *self* and the *other than self*'. This is otherness that is not (or not merely) the result of comparison, otherness 'of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such'. Ricoeur adds that 'selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, instead that one passes into the other…' (Ricoeur 1992: 2-3). In this way Ricoeur sets down a grounding for the way one might relate to, or conceive of, an other human being on an imaginative and subjective level, a relationship with what I have called 'an other like self'. return to text

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James Vicars writes both fiction and nonfiction. As well as finalising an account of the life of Australia’s first woman aviator, Millicent Bryant, he has contributed recent papers and a book chapter in the areas of biography and fictional biography. He is an Adjunct Lecturer in the School of Arts at the University of New England.

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General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy & Enza Gandolfo
text@textjournal.com.au