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Making to unmask - the creation of and reaction to Into White Silence

Abstract

This practice-led research paper considers, from a writer's point of view, the linked notions of masking and unmasking as they apply to creative practice in the field of writing fiction. It examines these notions within the framework of existing theory relating to the construction of 'Children's' and 'young adult' literature' drawn from scholars including Nodelman, Hunt, Rose and Immel. Taking as a starting point the question of whether 'unmasking' in fiction is truly possible, the paper considers both the creative process behind and critical reaction to, the author's 2008 young adult novel Into White Silence, and measures both process and response against the impact of masking and unmasking in the making of that particular work.

Keywords: masking; unmasking; making; creative practice; liminality; young adult fiction.

In her chapter in the 2009 edition of the *Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, Andrea Immel addresses the question of the construction of childhood. She opens her piece by addressing the notion of 'construction' in terms of meaning and authority:

Ideas about children's books are inextricably bound up with cultural constructs of childhood. But what does 'construct' or 'construction mean in this context? ... we might say that a construct is more authoritative than a notion or belief, because it is an idea based on observation and refined by analysis. A construct can never claim the authority of a model, paradigm or law. But it can exert considerable influence on people's thoughts and actions ... Constructs might be thought of as those acquired notions, of which we are generally unaware, that influence our attempts to accommodate larger social and cultural priorities with individual requirements in a given situation. (Immel 2009: 19-20)

This citation is a useful jumping off point for considering the linked ideas of 'making', 'masking' and 'unmasking'. For the purposes of this paper, I will, like Immel, be drawing upon the Oxford English Dictionary's linkage of a 'construct' with 'anything constructed, especially by the mind' (2009: 19) to explore the idea that the creative process of 'making' - in this case through creative writing - has an additional undercurrent of meaning to it; in making (or constructing) a fictional text, a writer - while not having the same quantifiable and measurable degree of influence as, for example, a lawmaker - is

nevertheless striving through their making to shape and form understandings of social and cultural norms. Like Immel's chapter, this paper will concern itself with the impact of this making in terms of the construction of youth, but with a practice-led focus, and looking specifically at the construction of the 'young adult' in young adult fiction.

This paper will also concern itself with the linked ideas of 'masking' and 'unmasking' as vital aspects of both the creative process, and also as key elements of the social construction that a text implies or asserts. I am using these terms to explore the role and impact of the presence of the writer within and behind the work: the nature of fiction writing requires, by necessity, the author of that fiction to remain to some extent masked. The notion of the implied author might be used as an illustrative example of this. By choosing to fictionalize their narrative, even if only slightly (by, for example, changing the names to protect the identity of their subjects), a writer must immediately introduce an element of 'masking', and this masking will in turn both influence, and be influenced by, the making process (in terms of both creation and construction).

At the same time, the idea of verisimilitude would seem to demand that - to some extent at least - an author of fiction must also engage in the process of unmasking, of both themselves as the 'maker' of the narrative, but also of the wider influence of constructs upon the text itself: the 'truths' behind the fiction.

In order to examine the relationship between 'making', 'masking' and 'unmasking', I'll start with the assertion that, contrary to what the title of this paper might suggest and contrary to what might seem intuitive, it is impossible to produce a creative work without also undertaking the process of masking. I'd suggest that 'making', in a creative sense, is as much about masking; hiding, obscuring, blurring, and rendering opaque the lines of classification - as it is about throwing clarity upon the world. The notion of 'making to unmask', then, might be said to pose something of a conundrum; if masking is, as I will suggest, a key element of the creative process, is 'unmasking' truly possible?

Liminality and 'Children's Literature'

I'm going to begin my argument with the disclaimer that I don't consider myself to be a theorist; my background is in the practice of writing, specifically writing 'for children' - whoever they are; and so, for the most part, the ideas I'd like to consider and discuss in this paper come from that perspective. I make this disclaimer because the idea of 'making to unmask' as it applies to children's literature is one that inevitably leads us into one of the most thorny and ongoing theoretical debates in the field of writing for children: that regarding the relationship between the writer and his or her audience.

There have been many and varied attempts to pin down, in a definitional sense, the elusive notion of just what is 'children's literature'; the complexity of the problem is alluded to by Hunt in his 2010 paper 'Reading Children's Literature and Writing For Children':

Writing for children *is* more difficult than writing for adults, just as reading children's books (for adults) is much more difficult than reading adults' books. Somewhere in the equation is a child, or the idea of a child, or a group of children, or some amorphous mass defined as children, or a specific childhood, or our idea of childhood, or the culture's idea of childhood, or the

publisher's idea of childhood. Then there is our relationship with these various childhoods, and our motives and our needs and *their* needs. (2010: 3)

For the purposes of this paper, I intend to take Nodelman's position (2008: 5) that 'children's literature' can and does encompass literature for 'young adults', but I am also taking the position that 'young adult fiction' - and particularly that at the 'older readers' end of the marketplace - is driven by a degree of liminality that places it between worlds, and in doing so allows both writers and scholars to access it from multiple perspectives. This is the position implied by Hunt, and which I believe becomes increasingly clear when considering both theory and practice of creativity.

This notion of the liminal in regard to 'young adult fiction' draws upon the premise that this particular 'field' of literature exists both *because of* and *despite* its position as the midpoint on the continuum between 'children's' and 'adult' literature. The notion of the 'young adult' as an inexpressible idea delineated by arbitrary (and transgressive) boundaries might be approached from a number of perspectives and although the primary function of this paper is the consideration of this idea of liminality from a practice-led perspective, some brief examination of the argument behind this position will be useful in contextualizing the discussion to follow.

In their introduction to the winter 2007 edition of *Discourse*, Boersma and Weintraub utilize the metaphor of the membrane to explore the significance of liminal space and its operation at the threshold of binary, hierarchical oppositions, reiterating Derrida's cautionary position in regard to the potential for 'numerous reductive misreadings' (2007: 6) when seeking:

a quick fix to the problems of binary models such as inside/outside, man/woman, speech/writing etc. Such readings ultimately lose their effectiveness insofar as they fail to heed the way a third term always mediates the relation between the two, but 'exists' only as a function of this relation of the two presumably oppositional terms. This third term is often thought of as the limit, the border, or the frontier between the two. (2007: 6)

While not intending to provide a 'quick fix' for the problem of defining and exploring 'young adulthood', and while certainly hoping to avoid a simplistic and reductive interpretation of the position and role of this tenuous concept and its literature to the status of 'intermediary literature', I propose that the notion of liminality is nevertheless a natural critical 'fit' for approaching the area of 'young adult' writing, from both creative and critical perspectives.

The term itself, 'young adult', implies the fact of its position as a threshold literature: the child on the threshold of adulthood, or even, perhaps, the 'literature' on the threshold of 'adult' sophistication. The linking of the loaded words 'young' and 'adult' both creates a distinct hierarchical opposition, and self-implies its validity. And with this implication comes the linked notion of cultural boundaries between states (in this case childhood and adulthood) that, while arbitrary, nevertheless imply their own legitimacy (see Couldry 2003: 28). To frame this discussion further I'd like to next consider two key ideas from two - for all intents and purposes - opposing theorists.

First, Jacqueline Rose: although Rose's central notion with regard to the 'impossibility of children's fiction' has for years now been hotly debated within the realm of children's literature study, this idea - which she proposes in

the opening pages of her 1984 text *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* - is, perhaps, an effective way to frame up the central idea behind this particular piece of practice-led research:

Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written ... but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. Children's fiction is clearly about that relation, but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. (Rose 1984: 1-2)

Rose's central tenet, that the presence and primacy of the adult in literature *for* and *about* children undermines absolutely its status as 'children's literature', is an interesting one with regard to the current popular and shifting conception of just what, even in the most general of terms, differentiates writing for 'children' from writing for 'adults', particularly with regard to those works in the domain of 'young adult' literature. If we consider the closing assertion in the paragraph above - that 'Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first ... the child comes after ... but where neither of them enter the space in between' - against some contemporary works for young adults and 'older readers' (to adopt the Children's Book Council of Australia terminology), a number of issues arise. The wording of Rose's idea is such it suggests that the adults, from their position of primacy in the world of children's literature, *choose* (even if subconsciously) not to enter 'the space in between'. (Rose suggests [1984: 2] that the generally overlooked or disregarded nature of children's literature as an act of seduction is the driving motivation behind this choice, which is an aspect of her argument tangential to this paper.) The idea that the adult refusal to enter the space in between is a choice, though, implies that the reverse is also a possibility; that the adult 'makers' *can choose*, if they wish, *to enter* into a creator/reader relationship that will require them to actively enter this liminal space.

From a practice-led perspective, my experiences with both the writing and post-publication reception of my 2008 novel *Into White Silence*, might provide a case-in-point for the argument that Rose's notion had some validity, especially when considered against current creative works being produced in the upper end of the 'older readers' demographic of children's fiction.

Of course, it's not that simple; and here I turn to my second 'key idea'. In contrast to Rose's assertion that the inescapable presence of 'the adult' in children's literature renders it an 'impossibility', and in a more contemporary approach to the same question, Nodelman suggests that the notion of 'the hidden adult' is, rather, one of the key foundations underlying the very *fact* of children's literature:

I keep arriving at the same conclusion. The simplicity of children's literature is only half the truth about them. They also possess a shadow, an unconscious - a more complex and more complete understanding of the world and people that remains unspoken beyond the simple surface but provides that simple surface with its comprehensibility. The simple surface sublimates - hides but still manages to imply the presence of - something less simple. (2008: 206)

Put another way, without the sublimated presence of ‘the adult’ behind children’s literature, it wouldn’t *be* children’s literature; the one is essential to the other and the ‘hidden adult’, in Nodelman’s view, ‘might be the key to the aesthetic pleasure offered by texts of children’s literature’ (2008: 206).

Where does this leave the writer of ‘children’s literature’? By this latter reckoning, remaining hidden (or, if you prefer, ‘masked’) behind the text is clearly a valid and indeed inevitable position for the children’s or young adult writer to take; your position as an adult ‘maker’ of children’s literature, rather than being a hindrance to your capacity to produce in the field, becomes crucial in the formation of levels of sophistication of meaning which underlie your text, lend it relevance, and allow it to speak to the dual audience of both adult and child readers to which, it can be argued, all children’s literature must speak (Rosen 2010: 16). Under Rose’s notion, though, this same position renders your work ‘impossible’ - a case she makes with close reference to Peter Pan, and the inescapable presence of adult desires that drive that particular ‘children’s classic’.

In both cases, though, I’d argue that there is a commonality - not in the positions taken by the two theorists, but in the fact that both identify, albeit subtextually, the idea of liminality in this field of writing; and this, I would argue, is where much of the ‘masking’ in creative practice takes place.

Making *Into White Silence*

Why *Into White Silence*? Chiefly because it’s a problematic book, in many ways; in terms of its status as ‘children’s literature’, because of the role of the author both within and without the text and because of the degree to which it purports to ‘unmask’ certain truths about both the writing process and - by implication - about ‘young adult fiction’ generally.

First, though, some background. Hunt, in his 2010 paper, suggests that there are four types of creative writers who might concern themselves with writing ‘children’s literature’:

The first type of creative writer consists of those people who write for therapy; they are, in fact, writing for themselves first (and often last) ... then there is what might be called, in adult creative writing, the ‘must write or die’ syndrome, where there is something that the writers *have* to say: creation is at work, and it will out! ... the third type of writer ... the only one I could ever use myself, consists in writing a children’s story because a children’s story is the best art-form for something you have to say ... and the fourth type of creative writer is the practical writer who wants to write for children because it looks like a good market. (2010: 6)

Like Hunt, I’d consider myself to be the third type of writer, though - if I’m being completely honest - I have at various times in my writing career identified myself as a member of all four categories, and I suspect that this position is the truthful one for most writers. Certainly *Into White Silence* was a book in which the demands of the narrative quickly overtook the original intentions of the author and which, as a result, posed a whole set of problems of classification I believe speak to some of the wider issues involved in the ‘unmasking’ of the makers of children’s literature generally. To fully examine

this notion I'd like to reflect first upon the creative process that drove this particular work into being.

In early 2005, I was awarded an Arts Fellowship by the Australian Antarctic Division, that enabled me to spend six weeks during the summer of 2005/2006 down at Casey Station in the Australian Antarctic Territories. The proposed project for which the fellowship was awarded was the writing of a young adult novel - sort of a high adventure historical fiction - specifically written to appeal to the 14- to 16-year-old demographic. My original conception was for a period piece of historical fiction, set in the early 1900s during the 'golden age' of Antarctic exploration, and in which a 15-year-old boy stows away aboard a south-bound exploration vessel. Trials - along the lines of Shackleton's disastrous 1915 transpolar expedition - would be endured, and survival would be wrested from the elements. With roughly this plot in mind, I boarded the Polar Science Vessel *Aurora Australis* in early December, and spent the next six weeks 'down south' conducting the field research which would inform the writing of the novel. After my return from Antarctica, I spent twelve months finishing my PhD, all the while with my commitment to the Australian Antarctic Division hanging over my head.

The problem I immediately faced was that the book I had intended to write wasn't there any longer. Whenever I approached it - this high adventure piece of 'Boy's Own' literature I'd promised the Antarctic Division - I found myself, for the first time in my writing career, paralysed from a creative point of view. My experience of Antarctica, combined with the study I'd been doing for my PhD, had shifted my ideas and transmogrified my original concept into a dark, gothic-influenced, postmodern tangle of adult desires and ambitions. The story in my head and appearing on the pages of my research journal was nothing like the high adventure novel I'd imagined; instead it was a contemplation of the significance of evil in a landscape where all human endeavour is utterly futile. This was a story heavily influenced by Conrad, Poe, Coleridge and Shelley, none of whom would generally be considered to be 'children's' writers.

Again and again I tried writing my 'YA Fiction', and again and again I fell short until, eventually, in the late months of 2007, I took a desk in the reading room of the National Library, surrounded myself with just about every academic and scientific text ever written on the subject of Antarctica, and surrendered myself to the story in my head.

And even then, it didn't click. The language was stilted, the point-of-view unconvincing, the words and sentences, once forced onto the page, either struggled and kicked - refusing to be edited in to any semblance of readability - or they just slumped there, limp and lifeless, and utterly lacking in any form of conviction. Finally, I realised that the only way to tell the story was to enter it. The writer as character. The character as writer. The same trick Zusak used in *The Messenger*; Gaardner in *Sophie's World*, or even Calvino in *If On a Winter's Night A Traveller ...* I inserted another voice into the story - a writer named Anthony Eaton, who lives in Canberra, who'd traveled the same Antarctic path as me at the same time, who'd committed a literary crime, and was now struggling with both his conscience and his story. The writer, both masked and unmasked, was now within the story. The 'fiction' of the narrative was deliberately clouded and manipulated by the not-so-hidden adult 'maker' who entered the pages and managed the events from within:

For almost two years now, the small leather-bound journal of Lieutenant William Downes has been sitting on a corner of my writing desk, defying me. I must confess that I've lost track of the number of times I've sat here in the twenty months since

the diary came into my possession, leafing through its pages and then starting out my study window at the distant Brindabella Mountains, sometimes for hours, trying to come to terms with the horrors contained within it. (Eaton 2008)

This citation is from the opening lines of the 'Author's Introduction' to *Into White Silence*. It is at the very start of the book, after several (unnumbered) pages of 'factual' information including a crew manifest, family trees for the main historical protagonist and antagonist, and deck plans for the ship which features as the main setting of the story. The pages of this introduction are similarly un-numbered, and this 'introduction' - which is intended to blend seamlessly in with the supposedly 'historical' preparatory material - gives the impression of nonfictive reliability.

In the process of opening the book in this manner, I allowed a palimpsest of nonfiction to fall across the story and from that decision on, the book almost wrote itself. For ten weeks the words poured out of me and on to my laptop. During this time, all thoughts of 'young adult fiction' were wiped from my mind; the story, to borrow again from Hunt, was being written in the voice and style in which it *demanded* to be written.

Those familiar with *Into White Silence* will know that the story doesn't end well, for anyone involved. The same was almost true of the writing. Usually when I'm approaching the concluding chapters of a book, I find myself filled with a sense of enormous excitement - anticipation of the moment when the final words suddenly present themselves, and the book is done. Often the biggest days of writing in any project are the last couple, as I race towards the finish, throwing caution and planning to the wind and letting the previous eighty thousand words of momentum find their own way home.

Not with *Into White Silence*, though. The end of that book slunk up on me like a dog in the night. The final pages wrote themselves and the last line - which is, I suspect, the most utterly bleak and depressing sentence I will ever write - slipped itself on to the page and I stopped typing, read it back, and then sat there, appalled.

Instead of the usual elation and achievement that follows hard upon that final moment, I found myself filled with a sort of odd despair. For almost 30 minutes I sat there in the National Library reading room, staring at the screen of my computer with my finger poised above the delete button - not just for the last line, but for the whole book. I remember, very clearly, asking myself one question, again and again: *What the hell is this thing?* I had no idea what the book was. I had no idea who would ever read it. Or like it. Even I hated it. Nobody would publish it, and if they did, nobody would read it.

The problem was that for all intents and purposes, I had no idea where the book *would fit*, or if anyone else would see it the same way as me. In the publishing world I'm regarded as a 'young adult' writer, but to my mind this book wasn't in any way 'young adult fiction', at least, not like any other 'young adult fiction' I'd read. But neither could I see a future for it as 'adult' fiction.

At an intellectual level, I could argue that *Into White Silence* might function as Young Adult Fiction, but I was a long way from convinced that others would see it the same way. Certainly it was a book I'd probably have enjoyed at 16 or 17, but it didn't have any of the 'markers' that I'd been looking at in my research; protagonist age, relevance of life experiences, use of contemporary language and idiom, addressing of issues of growth and emancipation immediately beyond school age, sense of closure and security in the ending.

None of these traditional measures for ‘young adult fiction’ were present in my book; consider the opening lines of the first chapter, in which the reader is introduced (by the ‘author’ Anthony Eaton), to the protagonist:

October, 1921

Hobart, Tasmania

The SS *Loongana* steamed slowly up the Derwent River towards its berth at the Salamanca Wharf, and Lieutenant (retired) William Downes, a young man distinguished by his service in France during the Great War, leaned on the portside rail, watching the city of Hobart slip slowly past in the hazy, late afternoon light. In the distance, the monolithic bulk of Mount Wellington, its summit shrouded in cloud, cast a long shadow across the city, rendering the waters of the river to inky blackness.

And me? In my turn I watch Lieutenant Downes, as I have so many times these last two years. I watch him in my mind’s eye, my perceptions of him filtered through the veil of time and a cross the vault of many years now passed. (2008: 1-2)

In terms of his age, life experience, cultural and social context, formative experiences and social expectations, my protagonist has little or no commonality with a contemporary ‘young adult’ readership. Additionally, the deliberately gothic tone of the writing - with its implied sense of menace, slightly arch tone reminiscent of late Victorian writing and vaguely melodramatic style - was a deliberate creative decision intended to mirror, in terms of style, content and atmosphere the opening lines of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*:

The NELLIE, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide. The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. (2007: 3)

In my initial response to the completion of the novel, and during the weeks that followed, I found myself increasingly concerned as to the question of what to do with this work: in making it I had both masked and unmasked myself as a writer and maker, and the construction of the novel as ‘young adult fiction’ didn’t sit at all comfortably. But I had an Antarctic Arts Fellowship still hanging over my head. I was also horribly aware that I hadn’t published anything substantial in about 18 months, and that I’d promised my editor a book for her new list and so, with few other options available to me, I sent it off, fully expecting the worst.

Random House published it under the ‘Woolshed Press’ imprint (which is modeled along the lines of David Fickling Books in the UK, and dedicated to the publication of ‘literary’ and challenging ‘Young Adult Fiction’) in late 2008. From the outset, it was quickly clear that *Into White Silence* was going to be a book that provoked strong reactions, on a number of grounds, but on two particularly: its classification as ‘Young Adult Fiction’, and its approach to the relationship between fiction and nonfiction. Both these debates, I’d suggest, were the result of different levels of ‘masking’ within the work.

Young Adult?

In 2009 *Into White Silence* was shortlisted by the Children's Book Council of Australia in the 'Older Readers' category of their annual *Book of the Year* awards and received an honour book award. It was similarly shortlisted in the 'Young Adult Fiction' category of the Queensland State Premier's Literary Awards, and long-listed in the State Library of Victoria's *Inky* awards for Young Adult fiction. At the same time, *Into White Silence* was entered for and accepted into the 2009 Miles Franklin award, despite the fact that, under the rules for that particular prize, children's and young adult fiction titles are deemed ineligible for entry. It was similarly reviewed as a work of adult literary fiction in *The Australian Literary Review* and also *The Age*, appearing alongside several other similar 'Adult' works. It has been reviewed online and in mainstream media both as an adult novel, and as a work for young adults:

Random House has called this a young adult book, publishing it under the Woolshed Press imprint, but it is essentially a crossover book, probably too narrowly labeled because of Eaton's previous nine books for teenagers and younger readers. (Moran 2008: 22)

For some years I've been interested in the 'masking' nature of 'Young Adult Literature' - particularly as it applies to those narratives that find themselves ambiguously positioned at the 'older readers' end of the field and exist in a sort of half-and-half world between adolescence and adulthood; the 'crossover books' referred to by Moran. Novels such as Lanagan's *Tender Morsels*, Zusak's *The Book Thief*, or Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which have found themselves, often simultaneously, speaking to two different marketplaces. Is it possible to argue that in these and similar cases their 'adult' nature is being masked by their 'young adult' status, or vice versa? Or, to put it another way, to what extent might these be thought of as 'adult' books that are hiding, disguised, in the world of children's literature? Despite my initial reservations as to its lack of 'fit', it would appear that *Into White Silence* is such a book, which leads me to consider the notions of making and masking and the roles that they played in this particular work.

In my PhD thesis, I identified and considered the implications of a rising trend in 'young adult' novels that blurs the line between adolescence and adulthood - sitting astride the two worlds and speaking to an audience that is, I argue, formed from the extension of many traditionally 'adolescent' markers upwards into the mid-late twenties and even early thirties: the increasing trend towards post-teen readers to remain living in the family home, for example, and economically dependant to a great extent upon their parents. This single trend, caused by a combination of economic circumstance and changing social conditions (Te Reiele 2004: 244), might be seen to be reflected in numerous social markers: the increase across the course of the last two decades in the average age at which women have their first child, the increase in the average age of people at their first marriages, the decline in marriage rates overall, the changing nature of the predominant structure of Australian households and numerous other factors (Wyn & Woodman 2006).

I'd venture the suggestion that the growing presence in 'Young Adult' awards, bookshelves and library shelves of works of fiction that can - if viewed from a certain perspective - be comfortably regarded as adult fiction that has been 'masked' as 'young adult' is another symptom of this changing social structure.

As our conception and experience of ‘adolescence’ shifts both upward and downward, so too does our literature for that readership.

Fiction?

The other much-discussed aspect of the novel was the link between fiction and nonfiction, and again, I’d suggest that this might be viewed as a form of ‘masking’ that, to a large degree, allowed the novel to function effectively as ‘threshold literature’; but this time dwelling in the liminal space between the oppositional notions of ‘fiction’ and ‘nonfiction’.

Certainly in the act of inserting myself as a character into the novel, and in the reflections and observations I chose to reveal to position the readers in relation to the formation of that character, there is an ongoing blend of fact and fiction, which often throws the ‘truth’ or otherwise of the novel into a deliberately liminal space. The content of this excerpt, for example, again from the ‘author’s introduction’ might be seen as a case in point:

Words are strange things. As a writer, it is something of a perpetual puzzle to me, how a few scrawled glyphs on a piece of paper can contain so much power over the human imagination. That such visceral experiences as love and hate and fear and pride and despair can be so easily bound to the page is a mystery which only deepens the more I explore it ...
... But all this is beside the point. My purpose in writing this forward is not to lecture you on the vagaries and power of the written word ... but rather to allow me the opportunity to outline, explain and apologise for the liberty I took in removing the journal of William Downes from the station library at Casey Antarctic Base during my sojourn there in the summer of 2005/06. (2008: Author’s foreword)

In this passage can be seen, I think, both the masking and unmasking of myself as writer, both the implied writer of the text, and the ‘real’ writer behind it. The first paragraph is, to all intents and purposes, something of a mission statement for me and, I suspect, many other writers. It is a statement deliberately inserted to reference many conversations familiar to any reader with a passing interest in the theory and practice of creative writing. The second paragraph, however, which rests firmly upon the verisimilitude established by the first, evinces the biggest, and most fundamental ‘lie’ of the entire novel - the existence of the journal of William Downes, and my supposed ‘liberation’ of it.

The critical response to this blending of maker and character was varied. Most reviewers understood the devices at play:

The author as trickster or author as inventor: Eaton deliberately confounds, asking the reader to believe him unreliable but forced into honesty. His sly conceit gives him the opportunity to run journal extracts to drive the narrative forward while his narrator fills in with family research, descriptions of his own voyage to Antarctica and comments on a writer's relationship to material and history, integrity and truth, and how to tackle a story that might already exist and which might not be one's story to tell. (Moran 2008: 22)

Other reviewers were less understanding, expressing variously their confusion, anger and disappointment at the discovery that the novel was, to their minds, ‘a

lie'. One review (which eventually went unpublished and which I obtained through unofficial channels and cannot therefore reproduce here in good conscience) was damning in its assessment of both the ethics of the writer and the literary merit of the book itself, and expressed the opinion that the best thing to do with *Into White Silence* would be to 'pulp it.'

This, by far and away, was the most vitriolic response I've ever had to something I'd produced creatively, and the also the response most clearly and causally linked to a conscious decision made by me during the writing process; in this case, the decision to 'mask' one of the characters in my creative work as myself, and never fully to 'unmask' that particular aspect of the fiction. To my mind, this example illustrates - albeit in a fairly extreme instance - the vital importance and impact of 'masking' upon both the writing process and also, equally as significantly, upon the process of categorization which inevitably occurs after the release of a creative work to the public. In the specific case of *Into White Silence*, I'd suggest that the presence of 'masking' is significant in four ways, all of which speak to the novel's identity as a liminal narrative:

- The presence of the 'author' in the work, along with other apparently nonfictional content, lends it an (undeserved) air of authenticity and credibility; more than one reviewer commented on the fact that they had difficulty discerning whether the novel was fiction or nonfiction; the book is a fiction that disguises itself as fact.
- At the same time, the 'factual' aspect of the book is regularly and deliberately undermined by the unreliability of the narrator, who admits to his corruption and nefarious motivations early in the book, reiterates his psychological and emotional instabilities throughout the course of the story, and in doing so calls into question the veracity of all his actions, reactions and interpretations throughout the entire narrative.
- The 'unmasked' author in the narrative is - in the tradition of Barthes and Blanchot - in no way the *actual* author of the novel, even though they share a common name and background. Thus the 'real' author remains masked, despite appearances to the contrary.
- At the same time, and in regard to the book's classification as 'Young Adult' or 'Children's' literature, there is a clear suggestion of 'masking' - this time in a broader sense, and perhaps more driven by the realities of publication and the publishing world. The book appears to sit astride two worlds: the 'adult novel' masked as 'young adult'; or conversely, a 'Young adult' novel wearing the disguise of 'adult fiction'.

Making to Unmask

Where does all this leave us? I find myself coming back to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: to what extent is 'masking' an essential aspect of the creative process? Do writers and creative practitioners need to 'mask' ourselves and our works in order for them to have even the appearance of 'unmasking'? And then, of course, the question is: 'unmasking what?'

There is no simple answer. Certainly there is a plethora of critical and theoretical positions that might be taken in regard to this question, none of which would prove entirely satisfactory. For now, I am content to offer the following reflective observation: despite my best intentions during the research and planning stages, *Into White Silence* became a novel that defied both its creator and, to a large extent, its readership. It is an adult novel that has found its greatest successes in the world of children's literature, and at the same time it is a 'young adult' novel that speaks to a shifting and developing readership

who are increasingly uninterested in many of the ‘masks’ young adult writers wear in order to reach the traditional ‘teen’ audience. It is a novel that purports to reveal and unmask the process and motivations of its author, but does so by weaving a web of fictions around the basic facts of the narrative.

It is, to my mind, a work of fiction that - depending on your perspective - dwells comfortably in the space between literatures. On the one hand, it can be argued that the work functions as a defense of Rose’s notion of ‘the impossibility of children’s literature’ in that it has been classified, published, reviewed and awarded as ‘children’s literature’ *despite* the clear indications that it fails to meet any of the traditional expectations of that field of creative practice. By this rationale, I believe there is an argument to be made that the ‘masking’ of the adult ‘maker’ (which in this particular work is very thinly veiled indeed) lends that ‘maker’ primacy in their relationship to the child reader (thus reinforcing the hierarchical binary between childhood and adulthood). It is also an inevitable aspect of the creative process, and therefore is a barrier to even the philosophical *possibility* of ‘children’s literature’.

The other perspective, and the one I tend to find myself gravitating towards, is that suggested by Nodelman in his discussion of the ‘simplicity’ of children’s fiction:

That something might well be identified as nonchildlike or beyond the ken of childlike consciousness - which might well be *why* it remains in the shadows. It is, by definition, not childlike. Inextricably tied up in binary habits of thinking, the childlike can be constructed and understood only in relation to that which it is not - the nonchildlike or, more directly, the adult ...

The unconscious of a text of children’s literature is the adult consciousness that makes its childlikeness meaningful and comprehensible, so children’s literature can be understood as simple literature that communicates by means of reference to a complex repertoire of unspoken but implied adult knowledge. (2008: 206)

This, for me, sits reasonably comfortably and can, I suspect, be applied beyond the scope of ‘children’s literature’ to throw light upon the wider implications of the creative process generally. Without masking - of maker, of text, and of subtext - there can be no ‘unmasking’, and thus the notion and importance of ‘unmasking’ can, as Nodelman suggests in relation to children’s literature, only be fully appreciated once we separate it from the oppositional idea of ‘masking’. Put another way, it is the liminality of young adult fiction that lends it its capacity to speak to multiple, cross-generational readerships.

My suggestion in this paper is that most ‘makers’ of creative product appreciate this idea, if only at an unconscious level. Just as the ‘hidden adult’ in children’s literature understands the value and importance of their ‘mask’ in relation to the ‘unmasking’ that is an essential aspect of writing for children, so too does the ‘maker’ of any form of creative product understand that the ‘unmasking’ capacity of their work is inevitably and intrinsically bound to their ability to make and sustain their own masks throughout the work.

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