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RMIT University, University of Sydney

Briohny Doyle, Ronnie Scott, Andrew Pippas, Sreedhevi Iyer

Taking Time: How time transformed the writing, reading and value of four Australian novels

Abstract:

This article explores the factor of time in the creative process of producing novels in Australia. Using case studies drawn from four specific novel writing practices, we examine the impact of time as an integral component of novel writing. Examining our narratives of this impact together, we found a shared basis in multi-level durational work present in each creative practice: 1. The emotional experience present in the arc of the writer during the production of a novel; 2. The survival of the novel operating in its necessary production pace despite the 21st century evolution of the industry and discourse; 3. The presence and function of time both within and outside the novel process; and 4. The anxiety around shifting discursive contexts over time that can shape novel production. Considering the complex and varied, yet shared, role of time in the practices of experienced and working novelists, we integrate our collective knowledge as a call for an overdue longitudinal study on Australian novel production.

Biographical note:

Briohny Doyle is a lecturer in creative writing at The University of Sydney and the author of three novels *Why We Are Here* (2023), *Echolalia* (2021) and *The Island Will Sink* (2016). She was a 2022 Fulbright scholar at The New School, NYC.

Sreedhevi Iyer is a lecturer in creative writing at RMIT University. Her fiction has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize in the US. She has been shortlisted for the Penang Monthly Book Award, the SPN Book of the Year Award, and The Star-Popular Reader's Choice Award for *Jungle Without Water* and *The Tiniest House of Time*. She recently published a monograph with Routledge, *Authenticity and the Public Literary Self*. Her work has appeared in journals in the US, the UK, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Sweden, Australia and Sardinia (Italy).

Andrew Pippas is a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Technology Sydney. His first novel, *Lucky's*, was published in 2020 and shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. *Lucky's* won the 2021 Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction. His second novel, *Transformations*, will be published in 2025 by Picador.

Ronnie Scott is the author of two novels: *The Adversary* (2020), which was a book of the year in *The Age* and shortlisted for a Queensland Literary Award and the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal; and *Shirley* (2023), which was a *Guardian* book of the year and shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction and the Voss Prize. He is a Chief Investigator on Folio, an oral history storytelling project about Australian comics funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage Scheme. He codirects RMIT's non/fictionLab research group and co-convenes Gutter Stars, an intervarsity comics group.

Keywords:

Australian novel, time, ethos, creative process, discourse analysis

Introduction

The Australian novel is a creative practice of international significance: a complex ecology of reading and writing that benefits all Australians. Novels acquire parallel lives at the event of publication, resonating subjectively and often privately with readers, although their effects may remain obscured from view. They also perform a public function: Australian novels tell stories about life on this continent, they provoke nationwide discussions, offer contradiction and nuance in a polarised media environment, and function for historians as an archive of everyday life (Doyle, 2022; Pasco, 2004). The cultural setting in which Australian novels are written and read is changing dramatically – these changes include climate crisis, extreme cost-of-living pressures, and an increasingly neoliberal political environment. Authors of novels continue to work during these challenges and produce work that responds to them. Presently, they also face a significant fall in incomes (Crosby et al., 2002), volatile funding environments, transformations in media production and consumption, and new challenges to copyright from generative AI. According to the most recent National Arts Participation Surveys (Creative Australia, 2023; Australia Council for the Arts, 2019) nearly half of Australians read fiction and one in six write creatively, with the most popular being prose fiction, which is written by 6 per cent of Australians – almost 1.6 million people. This demonstrates a consequential mismatch between the wide and continued cultural relevance of the novel, and worsening conditions for writing (and reading) novels, which needs consideration to understand and support the novel as a continuing site of significant cultural production.

Current studies of the novel invaluablely emphasise publishing and genre (Wilkins, Carter, Driscoll & Fletcher, 2016–2019) and literary-historical context (Birns & Klee, eds., 2023; Gelder & Salzman, 2009). However, there is a complex link between the durational work that goes into novels and their long and significant cultural life (van Loon, 2021), oftentimes manifesting in delay or mismatch between our recognition of a novel's cultural value, our understanding of how and why it is made, and our ability to support it through government, institutions and industry, which frequently focus on project rather than practice. This poses a problem for scholars, readers and writers of the novel, often along the axis of time, given the amount of time novels take to write and the diffuse temporality of their published situations. How can we address the ways that duration manifests in the novel as a cultural production? While writing about novels might situate their production in relation to significant events in public and private life, how can we gain insight into the complex interactions between events and creative processes during a novel's production and publication?

The novel is something created over a lengthy duration (Pippos, 2021), shared by people over long spans of time, and have a role in Australian life which is exciting and alive. Novelists are commonly focused on long-term practice rather than single works, but we rarely talk about novel writing as a creative act that is both accessible and intensive in resources and time; a widespread, often private form that exists in common practice.

As working novelists, the four authors of this article know that novels take time to write, and they take this time to create value for readers. As such, time needs to be explicitly considered when describing the cultural production of the novel. To examine the impact of time on this process of production, the authors were tasked with narratively investigating how private creative practice extends over time, becoming public knowledge that is sustained over time, and how this feeds back into application. Since taking time is a distinctive quality of writing novels, how does that quality affect the writing, reading and value of novels? What does it look like in practice and what methods might scholars develop to understand it?

Using case studies of their own practices, the four researchers were invited to consider how they are innovating under compounding pressures. What are the conditions necessary for novelists to keep writing? How might governments, educators and institutions better support a creative practice that must be sustained over time in the face of these economic and technological pressures? How does the writing of novels interplay with contemporary society and culture through the cultural life of the author and the book? What kind of public knowledge is made from sustained creative practice?

With their own working processes as a jumping-off point, the researchers took varied approaches to their discussions of time's impact on writing novels – yet each showed how their creative practice is underpinned throughout by multi-level durational work. This might include:

1. The emotional experience present in the arc of the writer during the production of a novel;
2. The survival of the novel operating in its necessary production pace despite the 21st century evolution of the industry and discourse;
3. The presence and function of time both within and outside the novel process; and
4. The anxiety around shifting discursive contexts that can shape novel production over time.

The case studies outline how these and other temporal factors are important entry points to understanding individual novelists' practices. Following the case studies, a conclusion argues for a durational interview project as a possible method of exposing the layered durational work that goes into writing novels to the benefit of other creative practitioners, as a way of approaching creative production that by its nature takes place over long periods of time.

Case Study 1 – *The Adversary* (2020) and *Shirley* (2023) by Ronnie Scott

This first case study – about two literary novels, each written over six years, with three years of overlap – explores how the overlap led the author to consider the novels more as expressions of practice than as discrete cultural products, and how intertextual ideas seemed to 'come through' in unplanned but enriching ways because both novels shared developmental time and space. Multiple novels by the Spanish novelist Javier Marías manipulate the image, adapted from Shakespeare, of the 'dark back of time', which he finally elaborates in the 1998 novel of the same title as "a name [for] the kind of time that has not existed, the time that awaits us and also the time that does not await us and therefore does not happen" (p.301) or that – more practically and less poetically – is extended in fiction. In the novel, Marías chronicles, discusses and fictionalises events that occurred in the wake of publishing his earlier novels, including his surprise election to the role of King of a true, sparsely inhabited island kingdom. The

definitionally inclined could ahistorically class *Dark Back of Time* as a kind of autofiction, but in approach, time period and intention, it is perhaps more like an essayistic style of postmodern metafiction – it is more reminiscent of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Kundera, 1985) or the authorial chapters of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut, 1969).

María Alhambra Díaz (2017) calls attention to a link between aspects of *Dark Back of Time*'s intertextuality and Marías's own 'poetics' as elaborated in a 1993 essay, in which Marías identifies an associative process by which links between the novel's various elements come to the narrative surface. The significance of these associations is that they are not causal but rather "those of mere union or kinship" (Marías, quoted in Díaz, 2017, p.194) – which to me aligns closely with the image of time as a body, one that extends in space and part of whose extension can awkwardly 'front' or position itself as the back, between which elements of textuality, reality and invention might be held in tension, juggled and suspended.

What Marías presents as "time's dark back" is a kind of spatialised time where the causal relations between the inside and outside of the text are malleable but real – Marías really was entitled in a physical island Kingdom, after having written a novel (1996's *All Souls*) about one of the novel's prior kings, the author John Galsworthy; and this entitlement really became the material of the novel that is arguably the most interesting thing about the entitlement.

In the twisting, corporeally coded functions of this spatialised time, we could not be further from Gotthold Lessing's 1874 assertion that poetry (meaning text) is extended in time, while art is extended in space. But we are also quite far from the most common ways in which time is spatialised in textual narrative, and literary and cultural theory – for example, de Certeau's (1984) physical place becoming semantic space through use and memory, Genette's (1980) measure of narrative time that is really a measure of the material page, or Bergson's concept of duration, a basic way in which the ongoingness of time is made spatial or discrete (Grosz, 2001, p. 140).

Like the "vastness" ascribed associatively to spaces by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1964), Marías's offers a poetics of time that suggests a novelistic lack of distinguishment between elements of a storyworld, nondiegetic elements (like address and voice) and time in the world outside the novel, spatialised into a form where associations and emphases are more important than what has been read when. I think of this when I consider the relationship between my own two published novels, *The Adversary* (2020) and *Shirley* (2023), which were written over a total span of nine years: six years apiece, with three years of overlap.

The Adversary was written in fits and bursts: first, a set of short stories that I thought would be a publishable manuscript and then accepted was really a way of learning different approaches to writing fiction; then, an expanded version of the most effective of those stories; then, various attempts at combining characters and plots so that the 'good things' I had landed on could be extended, recombined, challenged and emphasised. In the long gaps while this novel was peer-reviewed, agented and edited, I began writing *Shirley*, the novel that was published in 2023, and had come up with a version of the novel that had a 'full' word count and was complete –

at least continuous – in its plot by the time the corrected pages of the 2020 novel, *The Adversary*, went to print.

At this point in time, the ‘complete’, ‘continuous’ second novel contained events, transitions and characters but it really did not work – a bit like the Australian phrase ‘all the gear, no idea’; everything in place and the result of a huge amount of labour but none of the special material that takes a novel into that fictive space that we sometimes – perhaps weirdly – characterise as ‘more than the sum of its parts’. You could easily think of this material as depth, or sophistication, or clarity, or quality – all metaphors that have in common their mutual distinction, their clear importance to fiction and their near-meaninglessness when they appear unattached to specific textual effects. At the same time, specific textual effects are not the measure of any of these features, which attain their meaning in a finished and published piece of text through balance and recombination. Susan Sontag (2002) writes that “what I write is smarter than I am” (p. 267), identifying a craft relationship between textual features and time, which she formulates as a kind of rereading and rewriting process: “My books know what I once knew” (p. 267).

In Marias’s time, this knowledge includes previous books – the writing of them, their narrative surface and their action in the world as books with reading lives. The discursive space triangulated from these modes of time is ‘time’s dark back’, a different form of novelistic time than plot and narrative. To finish *Shirley*, the novel that was eventually published in 2023, I tried to use this form of time, given that something now existed (the 2020 novel *The Adversary*) that I could reference; I repeated certain phrases, the six main characters in that novel show up at different points to heighten themes or provide counterpoints, and the two novels share a geographical and semantic location, being written and based in a particular city: Melbourne.

More than this, it became clear that particular shapes, concerns, ideas, techniques and motifs needed to be developed if the second novel was going to do its job – it would almost have felt ‘wrong’ for these things to be ‘brand new’. This took place in ways that could be identifiable to a reader; as a concrete example, I had learned in writing the first novel that I could write a ‘dinner table scene’, and what kinds of emotional ideas this kind of scene was fit to develop; so there are scenes in both novels that echo each other and could be said to gain more meaning from being read together. This ‘co-development’ also took place in ways that are harder to name but which are the kinds of things that are often important to people who write and read – the mix of tones, of long and short scenes, impressions of things like class and race and species and serostatus and gender. These were more interesting to write in the 2023 book as well as more viable to finish when they were written with the 2020 book *The Adversary* in mind, as a kind of ‘shadow book’ counterpart to the book-in-progress – even though the first was finished and published and so it is *Shirley* that should be more like a shadow.

In its finished effect, neither novel is particularly metafictional or reflexive, or even essayistic – they can both be read as autofictional, although by my lights they are not, and they are not particularly intertextual with each other beyond a few points such as those identified. However, it seems to me the combination of *The Adversary* and *Shirley* becomes a part of both novels in

a real way that is identifiable if novels are thought of less as products and more as practice. I once asked an Australian poet how she knows when one book of poems is finished and ready to be published and another is ready to begin. She said her books are not started or finished, and she does not have this information – they are arbitrary breaks in a continuing practice. Just as a book of poems might nevertheless be sequenced to draw out associations, ideas, effects and themes – and is certainly a discrete product to its market – there are benefits to treating novels as if they are both ‘complete’ and as if they are carved-out aspects of a practice. This is Georges Simenon speaking to *The Paris Review* in 1955 (Collins, 2006):

all the critics for twenty years have said the same thing: “It is time for Simenon to give us a big novel, a novel with twenty or thirty characters”. They do not understand. I will never write a big novel. My big novel is the mosaic of all my small novels. You understand?

Important things about novel writing become open to study when they are seen as stopping points along the development of practice, and practice is something that can also be enjoyed and read.

Case Study 2 – *Lucky’s* (2020) by Andrew Pippos

The writing of my first novel, *Lucky’s* (2020), spanned about eight years from the start of the first draft to the final work on the proofs in mid-2020. Given this long gestation period, it is difficult to think about the composition of *Lucky’s* without taking into account the effect of time on the novel. The influence of time in novel writing, at least in the case of my first book, is analogous to the effect of light in photography: with enough time the right mood can be established and the subjects can be most clearly or dramatically seen.

The novel comprises several strands of narrative, but its central concern is the rise and fall of a fictional chain of cafés founded by the character Lucky. I intended the novel to track the lifespan of what historians of immigration call the Greek-Australian café and milk bar: this decision resulted in the narrative time of *Lucky’s* stretching to about eighty years. A brief description of this obsolete milieu might be helpful. In 1913, six hundred shops existed run by Greek migrants in Australia, and 14 of these were cafés or other kinds of eating houses (Tamis, 2005, p. 37). By the 1930s, many cafés specialised in milkshakes, which were sold as a healthful and wholesome drink, and in the next decade many café owners restyled their businesses as milk bars: by 1937, there were some four thousand milk bars in Australia (Alexakis & Janiszewski, 2016, p. 16). In the late 1930s, cafés – which likely numbered in the hundreds – tended to be larger premises and feature more elaborate interior design than milk bars, although both styles of business favoured a genre of American art deco known as streamline moderne. Historian Leonard Janiszewski (2016) explains the reasoning for the art deco design: “Greek café proprietors recognised that the architectural aesthetic they desired for their business had to both entice people in and reflect part of what could be obtained inside” (p. 17). What could be obtained inside the café was an encounter with modernity and hybridity, with restaurant culture and the makings of Australian multiculturalism. The café and milk bar functioned as portals of escape. Jukeboxes played big band music and rock’n’roll. The floors

were chequerboard or terrazzo. Greek migrants in these businesses, while serving American food to Australian customers, attempted in their own ways to maintain the social spirit of the Hellenic *taverna* and *kafenio*. In cities, many cafés and milk bars were situated near cinemas, which made it convenient for customers to take a meal or a milkshake before watching the movie. In country towns, cafés functioned as hubs for local communities. Janiszewski (2016) claims “although they provided city and rural communities with a ‘local sense of community’, for the most part, Greek café families were a socially and racially marginalised group – a fringe community, existing along the outer social perimeter of the host society”(p.19).

Lucky's was written from a point in time in which the milieu it described had become obsolete. As a novelist, I am drawn to settings that are sliding off the map, that have vanished or survive only in degraded form, when the full trajectory of a cultural phenomenon can be apprehended. The social background of my first novel is also a part of my life: during my childhood, at a most impressionable time, I spent a great deal of time in the café world. My father and uncles and aunts and grandparents told me stories about war and migration and life in the cafés of Australia, and they were the first people to tell me about Greek myths. The myths naturally led to an interest in novels. These childhood conversations illuminated the past and the present world, and remain among the great gifts of my life: this is where my love of literature begins. While the novel is not memoir, nor is it proposed as a memorial, nor an exercise in nostalgia, part of the creative process required me, at times, to describe what I remembered of the café setting and transform this material into fiction for the effect of verisimilitude (perfect fidelity to the memory was not always the goal). In this way the creative process itself involved frequent temporal shifts. The use of memory as artistic resource is an ancient activity and grounded in Greek literature from the Archaic Period: in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, is identified as the mother of the nine muses.

While the long gestation of the novel was not designed, and felt painful at times, its slow development was ultimately beneficial. During the period I worked on the manuscript, the time came when I accepted that the Greek-Australian café was definitively obsolete. One ‘event’ that underlined this fact was the destruction by fire in 2014 of the Café De-Luxe, my uncle's business in the New South Wales town of Brewarrina. This terminal point gave me a helpful, if sombre, position from which to write a novel: I had a sense I could now see the full trajectory of the milieu I was trying to write about. The locus of the novel addresses the past, the lost world of the café and its place in assimilationist and multicultural Australia. The death of the café phenomenon corresponds with the movement – a trend rather than a rule – of the second or third generation of café children out of the kitchens and into white-collar employment. The cafés were longstanding, family-run concerns, but they were also vehicles for migration and for class mobility; obsolescence, delayed by one or two generations, was built into their design.

As I worked on *Lucky's*, the café world also became a focus of study for Australian historians of immigration. Perhaps the most significant of these historians, Janiszewski, theorised the idea of the café as a ‘Trojan horse’ that introduced American food and leisure habits to Australian popular culture. In 2016, Janiszewski and photographer Effy Alexakis published a coffee table book, *Greek Cafés & Milk Bars of Australia*, which reads, in its documentation of family

businesses, as a catalogue of ships. Janiszewski argues that although the café is “rapidly fading from the nation’s culinary landscape, its sociocultural legacy and influence remain, often almost inescapably, part of the daily lives of many Australians” (p.22). The early years of the 21st century also saw the National Museum of Australia, the Queensland State Library and the Macquarie University Gallery, among other institutions, present exhibitions about the Greek-Australian café. This growing field of scholarship and public retrospection supported and challenged me as I redrafted *Lucky’s*. At no point did I feel like I was writing the zeitgeist, but I did feel as though I were part of a wider public exercise of reflection on a phenomenon.

The event of publication was a public exercise for which I could not prepare. Garth Greenwell observes that “publishing a first novel induces a peculiar kind of insanity”, and I was no exception. I worried about the stock of *Lucky’s* in local bookstores – did they have too many copies? Did they have too few? I asked friends to read reviews and gently tell me what they said. I was often happy but in general slept poorly. It took several months to ‘let go’ of the novel – that is, to get used to the fact that the commercial and cultural fates of the book were out of my control. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the publication of *Lucky’s* is that it affirmed and deepened my interest in lost worlds and so pointed the way to my second novel, which is again set in a public institution that is no longer quite what it was: the daily newspaper.

Case Study 3 – *The Island Will Sink* (2016), *Echolalia* (2021) and *Why We Are Here* (2023) by Briohny Doyle

The third case study considers the continued relevance of the novel – despite ongoing critical and commercial challenges – in relation to a novelist’s fifteen-year career. It considers how time shapes and changes the way a writer frames their work both in terms of practice and production. In 1965, Frank Kermode wrote in the *New York Review of Books* that “the special fate of the novel, considered as a genre, is to ‘be always dying’”(p.24). For Kermode (1965), this death was proclaimed by writers and critics who worried about the distinction between social reality (at any given time) and “the land of fiction”. This, Kermode noted, was not a concern shared by “the public for popular novels”, who continued to read widely. Reading widely means reading from a shifting present into personal and public realms evoked in other times.

The imminent death of the novel, and concerns about its relevance and viability, has continued for almost sixty years since with (often white and mostly male) writers like Jonathan Franzen, Will Self, Lionel Shriver and critics like Joseph Epstein adding to the chorus. That the novel continues to be a site for debate over what fiction can and should look like is evidence of its continued vitality. Having more published novels by diverse authors including women, non-white authors, LGBTQIA+ writers and novels in translation than there were in 1965 proves that the form is important, and can indeed address social realities if practitioners are from diverse backgrounds. Novels, after all, can be written by anyone. Though their publication may be subject to various, temporally and culturally specific trends, their development requires no special equipment, collaborators or industry support. Assuming the desire to write a novel exists, the primary resource needed to complete it is time.

I am the author of three published novels and, like Ronnie Scott I think of many years of writing, thinking and living such that their boundaries sometimes feel arbitrary even if their ‘stories’ are contained. The manuscript for my debut, *The Island Will Sink* (2016), was written over a period of ten years. When I have said this at literary events it is produced a shocked response necessitating clarification that I obviously did not spend ten years in a garret writing a manuscript but worked in varying levels of intensity on the manuscript while engaged in many other activities. During this decade I obtained income through a combination of Youth Allowance and Newstart payments, postgraduate student subsidies and casual jobs in service, retail, hospitality and the media. Towards the end of the decade, I completed a PhD and started to teach literary studies and creative writing in Australian universities. I also wrote and published short works including poetry, essays and short fiction and read many books written by other people. I tended to my relationships and communities, travelled, signed petitions, took to the streets and to new technologies, all of which informed the directions taken in the novel.

Novel writing is an important and sustained practice that takes place over an extended duration. Time, as experienced by the novelist, both impacts and is impacted by the practice of writing. *The Island Will Sink* was successful in so far as it was positively reviewed in mainstream media, I was invited to writer’s festivals and to speak on the radio, it sold sufficiently to earn out its modest advance. It also went out of print in 2020 when the not-for-profit publisher ceased to trade. While I feel deeply regretful about this, I am aware of novels published by commercial publishers that have been removed from circulation five years from publication date. I know of novelists who are faced with the question of whether they wish to buy surplus stock or accept that it will be pulped. For first-time novelists, these commercial realities can be a barrier to writing and publishing after the debut. In contemporary book markets, a novel may take longer to write than it will remain in commercial circulation. A longitudinal study of the kind argued for here could address this reality. How common is this? Does it impact the kinds of novels written? Does it affect the writer’s relationship to production from one novel to the next?

In the decade it took to develop *The Island Will Sink* from a concept to a published novel, technological advances occurred with a rapidity that necessitated changes to the manuscript. A work of literary science fiction, the novel featured technologies such as augmented reality, which were hard to describe in 2006 but commonly understood by 2016 (the AR game ‘Pokémon Go’ was also released in 2016). Several times I changed the way technology, immigration, climate catastrophe and transportation were represented, as real world changes outpaced my predictions for the future. One editor made a useful change by removing the year of the novel’s setting from its first line. Though this extended the relevance of the text it also means that, after a few hard drive crashes, I can no longer comment on how closely we now correlate in terms of technological change, or anthropogenic climate change to the novel’s imagined timeline. While writing my second novel, *Echolalia* (2021) the story of which takes place across a timeline separated by twenty years, from recent past to near future, I obsessively researched the kinds of changes we might expect. Ironically, the novel was published in 2020 during the international public health crisis of COVID-19 that was not anticipated by the novel or its publishers.

I elaborate on this experience to illustrate a broader reality: by the time readers come to a novel, the time of its writing has passed. Its author is likely on to the next thing, whether in writing or life. The novel is already an historical archive, even when it is ‘front list’ – a publishing term for a book that came out in the past year. Because most Australian novels are printed in one format only (trade paperback) their move to the ‘back list’ represents a high number of designated new ‘old books’ per annum. What is the impact of this cycle on how we read and write? A longitudinal study consisting of interviews with novelists across the spectrum of their careers would go some way to exploring this question.

I have had cause to dwell on this question myself while reflecting on the publication of my third novel *Why We Are Here* (2023) which was written in a year while under contract to a publisher. This novel, set squarely in the present of its writing, again considered the speed of technological change and how we process and adapt to our present challenges. It was written during, and explicitly addresses, the COVID-19 crisis. Though it was completed in 2021, its publication was scheduled for mid-2023. As such, it recorded in real time something that we wished to put behind us by the time of its publication.

In this way, my first and third novels exemplify certain relations between temporality (both fictive and real) and the novel. It is not possible to write fast enough; the future you have imagined is already here and the present in which you are intervening will already be past. This even before someone else decides to sit down and read a novel – an act we all know can take a considerable investment of time, particularly given demands from screen media including the 24-hour news cycle across print, TV, the internet as well as social media and email. Now, as I consider my next novel project and reflect on these prior experiences I am struck by several facts:

1. In the time it takes me to develop the outline for a new novel many Australian novels, some by first time novelists, will have moved from front to back list. They will no longer be stocked in bookstores, a particularly pertinent fact given that, at time of writing, the Australian online retailer Booktopia, who were committed to supporting local authors, and had warehouse space for ‘backlist’ stock, has just announced it is going into receivership.
2. While the speed of production and turnover for novels as consumer products may have increased, novel writing by individuals continues largely at the same pace. If there are more novels, therefore, it is because more people are writing them, more are being published, or a combination. This confirms the health of the form but not its viability, or the level of support for writers or even readers.
3. The diversity (both in terms of stories and authors) of novels available speaks to the form’s continued cultural relevance. At the same time, space in the media to cover novels, and on shelves in bookstores to sell them, is limited. How does a novel assert its cultural relevance in time?

4. Although 1 and 3 are true, novels continue to circulate as second hand books, via libraries and through informal lending practices, supporting Pippas's (2021) assertion that novels form part of a lively exchange between people. Although we write and read alone, novels circulate in communities of readers over time.

Consideration of these facts will certainly impact the nature of exploration I undertake in my next novel. That said, I cannot know ahead of time what other developments will feed back into this long-term process. This, to me, is part of the attraction of the novel. Novel writing is a dynamic and iterative process of figuring out the world. Ideas, responses and imaginings develop and disintegrate over the period of writing. The writer, while involved in this process, observes the world around them in relation to their specific, developing "world of fiction" (Kermode, 1965, p.24). This, too, seems to me a strength of the form and a reason for its necessity and continued support.

Continuing to write novels despite the challenges outlined in this paper prompts me to take the last part of Kermode's (1965) assertion to heart as a creative imperative: "Always be dying!" (p.24) That is, always be a specific subject working in time which is experienced both as continual change and finitude. A longitudinal study would go some way to uncovering how other Australian writers navigate their practices over time.

Case Study 4 – *The Tiniest House of Time* (2020) by Sreedhevi Iyer

The fourth case study considers the role time plays in evolving known and accepted literary discourse around the definitional aspects of a writer's personhood. As much as a longitudinal study of time in the production of Australian novels is necessary for a focus on the process of creative production, it is also necessary to discuss the role of a changing and developing discourse around author categorisations in the literary industry. This includes overt emphasis on identity labels, perhaps even prioritised over the work itself, while the challenges of the work, such as the complex layers of time taken for the execution of a written work, due to prevailing aesthetic standards.

In a globalised discursive environment, identity categories such as BIPOC, writer of colour, or postcolonial writer have become so interchangeable as to become meaningless (Iyer, 2022). A persistent aesthetic dilemma surrounding literary influences remains, however. Who are the literary ancestors of a writer in Australia who has been born elsewhere, speaks several languages, including an English that is not the Australian English of her surroundings, and has to be mindful of not explaining the unfamiliar to a culturally strange readership without committing the sin of didacticism? Additionally, once published, how does such a writer continue maintaining a sense of market viability while also pursuing excellence in their current creative process?

So much of contemporary literary discourse functions to disenfranchise than enable artistic excellence, through a misguided focus on the *being* of the author rather than the *doing* of the

author. As Nancy Fraser argues in *Justice Interruptus* (1997), while the cultural construct of an identity is justified in the name of ‘authenticity’, it goes on to valorise a group’s ‘groupness’, or, “to put the group out of business as a group” (p. 19). “Identity”, says William Connolly in *Identity, Difference* (2002), “requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (p. 64). Instead of encouraging inclusivity, the demarcation increases its artifice.

As an author of two books of fiction – a collection of short stories, *Jungle Without Water and Other Stories*, and a novel, *The Tiniest House of Time* – my relationship with the process of literary output has as much to do with evolving away from definitional categories, as it has been about the time taken to produce quality narratives. Both elements – time and self-definition – have gone hand-in-hand every time. Is this a more common experience than we dare admit? And perhaps more pertinently – could this reality be shifted due to potential findings on the matter in a proper longitudinal study?

My second book, *The Tiniest House of Time*, took ten years in the making, after a visit to Myanmar in 2006. It engaged with lost histories, evolving into an artefact existing in lieu of appropriate documentation and acknowledged pasts. Hugh Tinker’s *A Forgotten Long March* (1975) remains one of the few peer-reviewed sources evidencing the still unknown exodus of hundreds of thousands of Indian colonial subjects, who, after the Fall of Rangoon in WWII, made their way on foot from Rangoon into India. The trek caused loss of life in the tens of thousands.

While the research – through microform, banned articles, obscure memoirs and drip-feeds of declassified documents from The London Office – was important and fruitful, it eventually caused a delay in the project. The writing process itself then became bogged down and limited by the burden of untold history. How does one *tell* something when all of the Romantic movement, specifically Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Poetic Principle* (1903), forbade it in favour of *showing*? How do you tell something important to a reader who has no idea of the context?

This catch 22 remains among writers in the English language outside the Anglophone – to have to explain something contextual while simultaneously forbidden from doing so, as per the contemporary rules around aesthetics. Edwin Thumboo (1985) terms these contextual challenges as the postcolonial writer’s “ecosystem”. Thumboo later demonstrates this in the form of a diagram in *Literary Creativity in World Englishes* (2008), where the situation of the writer is contextualised by both ‘b’: an inherited aggregate of beliefs, and ‘c’: an acquired skill of language and literature, before forming into the subsequent elements of Occasion, Subject/Theme and Idiolect, before becoming the literary product (see Figure 1).

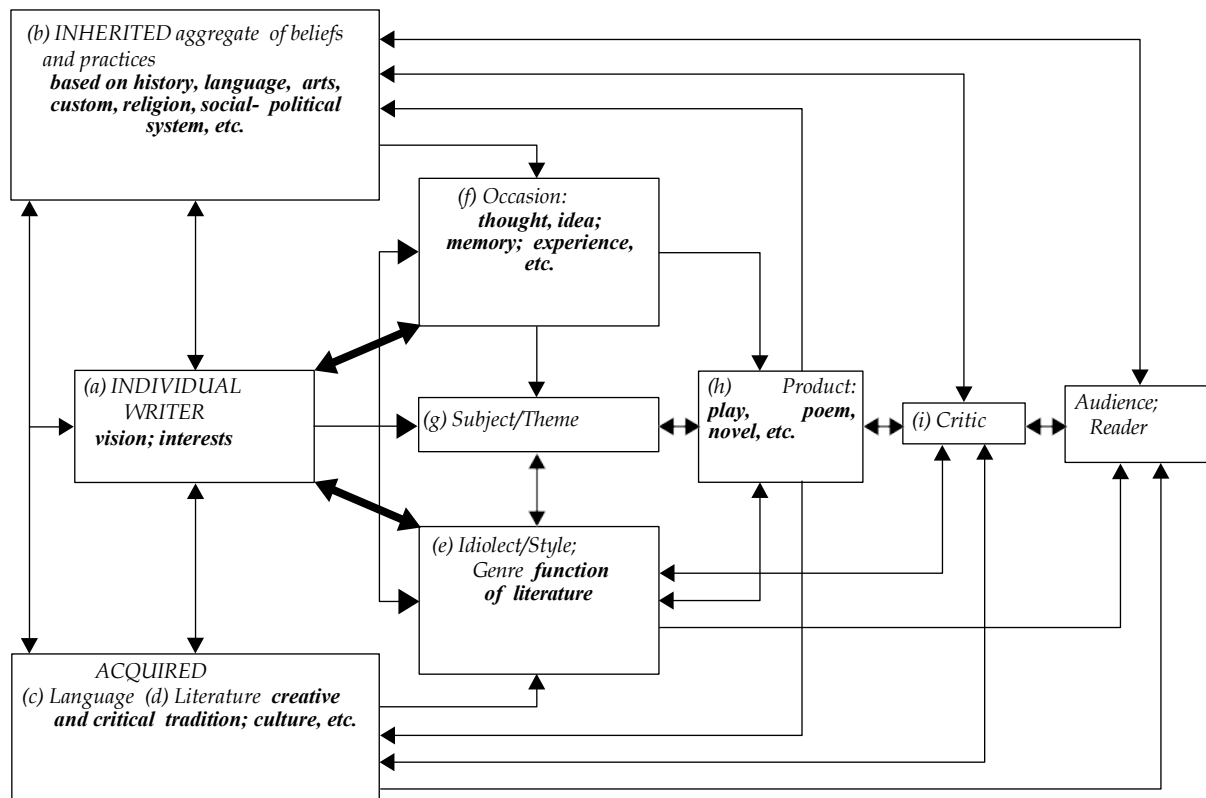


Figure 1. Situation of the writer in world Englishes (Thumboo, 2008)

Gish Jen, in *Tiger Writing* (2013), finds that the context around the writer registers far more than their individuality, given actual, anthropological differences in the perception of art. Jen articulates this further in an experiment comprising of having a group of Western Europeans and a group of ethnic Asians (Jen's terminology) view the same work of art separately. Each group registered completely different details, with the Western European group registering the individuals in the work, and the ethnic Asians registering the landscape more – the context within which the individuals were visible. Being culturally different, according to Jen, did not just mean a difference in understandings – it actually meant *seeing differently*.

And yet, could this perhaps be another symptom of Fraser's putting the group out of business as a group, of Connolly's converting difference into otherness, to secure self-certainty? What are the dangers of a marginalised group constantly highlighting their own marginalisation? When does it stop being an act of speaking truth to power, and start becoming a tired cultural trope cultivated for self-commodification?

Participating in a global, low-residency Master of Fine Arts in Hong Kong worked to expand and diversify my creative practice. Questions on literary aesthetics outside the ambit of American or British literary traditions, while simultaneously speaking back to its linguistic influences, began to imbue my stories. As a global MFA, faculty members were from the US, the UK, Israel, Denmark, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, Korea and India. Some were traditionalists and found my work experimental. Others found the works more true than the artifice of contemporary gatekeeping.

I found this paradox repeating itself in publication. During the publishing process of my short story collection for a UK publishing imprint, I faced an editor who repeatedly pushed for a more conservative version of each story. I had to resist at every turn. With the book's Southeast Asian edition, the general feedback from colleagues in the region was on how 'American' the stories seemed, but that it retained verisimilitude. Additionally, its Australian edition resulted in completely contrasting reviews – what an Asian reviewer had liked, the Australian reviewer had not, and vice versa.

I decided the main goal for my writing needed to be this – that they be inkblots for multiple projections.

In a way, this meant both an acknowledgement of Thumboo and Jen, but also a discarding of them, perhaps, in the Bloomian sense. As a halfway point, I lean more towards the idea of the transcontextual writer (Iyer, 2024), the writer who knows their ecosystem but can still transcend them. Derived from the anthropologist Gregory Bateson's (1972) notion of the double bind, the term leans on Bateson's argument that context is *created* in every human interaction, through behaviour and response behaviour, and the expectations and rules that get set up around those patterns of behaviour. Experiencing these interactive rules is behaviour according to context, or Bateson's double bind. The transcontextual behaviour, according to Bateson, is behaviour that *deviates* from the rules, which both breaches and *exposes* the set context (Bateson, 1972; Iyer, 2024). The transcontextual writer, I posit, is an extension of Bateson's view – the writer today needs to transcend the context of identity categories, and make the contextual breach visible and exposed through deviation from expected behaviour.

Such a journey demonstrates a process undergone over large swathes of time. It has involved destabilising, developmental and unexpected factors that served to alter my psyche and perception as a creative practitioner. The dynamics around these paradoxical shifts are hardly unique and require further detailed analysis through established methods for more concrete findings.

Conclusion

According to *Revive*, the Australian Government's 2023 Cultural Policy, all Australians are entitled to culture, and it is urgent to celebrate and robustly support the arts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). Supporting the novel is particularly urgent because novel writing, both in terms of its process and effects, is durational and dispersed yet it is practiced in highest proportions among socially disadvantaged groups (Australia Council for the Arts 2020). This is a powerful challenge to researchers of the novel whose potential benefits are immense.

The novel is written in time, through time, about and against time. We believe that these case studies demonstrate some of the complex ways that this manifests in the practices and outputs of four novelists. Following these narrative case studies drawn from individual practitioners, we argue for the need for further interviews about the novel whose methodology is longitudinal,

i.e. novelists revisited at different points in their practice. Given the above case studies, compelling reasons include:

- Novels simply take a long time to write, eight years (Case Study 2), one and ten years (Case Study 3); six and six years with three years' overlap (Scott); fourteen years (Case Study 4). This is also intermittent, with many points at which the time outside the writing impacts practice;
- The content of novels is involved in changing and disappearing time, that is 'sliding off the map' (Case Study 2) or has not been preserved in accessible ways (Case Study 4). This affects the kind of time that can be captured in a novel, the sense of figuring or representing something that may be obsolete (Case Study 3) – a hard-to-articulate mode of time that is perfectly aligned to the fact that 'how novels work' is hard to articulate anyway, and is always about balance and recombination (Scott);
- Current ways of understanding the practice of novel writing seem incomplete or insufficient to novelists, e.g. the search to identify and position the literary 'ancestry' of a novel that may have nothing to do with a novelist's current practice (Case Study 4);
- The vitality of the novel is in some way involved with the sense that it is perceived as culturally dying, and is anyway given ballast by the asynchrony of its thriving with the changing – sometimes worsening – conditions for reading and writing (Case Study 3);
- Changes in bookselling and material production do not change the pace at which a novel may be written, be it fast or slow (Case Study 3) – another in-built asynchrony, which affects the practices and meaning of both reading and writing;
- As well as being difficult to articulate, the practice of novel writing is simply odd, and this extends to the kinds of time it involves and dramatises; for example, the compression of multiple motivations until they emerge as the regular expression of an urge (Case Study 2); its possible expression through the language of bodies, their occluded sightlines and kinship without cojoinment, which may differ considerably from even highly various ways of accepted, spatialised versions of time, or time as it is used, experienced, and conceptualised by people (Scott). Time in the novel is odd just as plots, characters and themes are odd, so it makes sense to study it over plenty of time;
- The time of a novel's publishing can be very different from the time of its writing (Case Study 3), shocking for writers, and out of sync with the 'event' of publication (Scott, Doyle, Pippas & Iyer) as well as the writing 'event'. The important things about novelists' careers are out of sync with each other but impact each other in a present time.

Perhaps the novel, for all its specificity, is also a 'way in' to understanding the nature of creative labour that must be sustained over time. In better understanding the novel as a practice that is undertaken through complex layers of time, we might shift public understanding of creative practice as something that may be attempted and sustained, and whose meaning resides in its sustained nature – with product being just one part of how creative work is made and the role it plays in the lives of professionals and non-professionals alike (however differently).

A responsive, longitudinal interview methodology – for example, spending extended time over multiple years with a large cohort of novelists, across generation and genre; local and diasporic – asking them to account for their labour would create a vivid picture of those parts of knowledge that emerge through sustained practice. How do Australian novelists innovate in a period defined by the instantaneous, the digital and the high commodity? And how does the ongoing work of an Australian novelist take place both live and online beyond publication, developing extended pictures of novelists’ processes, including how they interact with funders, markets and communities of practice and how this dynamic feeds back into innovation?

It will be useful to Australian novelists, readers, arts funders and other kinds of creative practitioners to build an evidence base on the changing practice of novel writing and create an evaluative framework for how private creative practice comes to function in the world as public knowledge (Iyer, 2024). Such an evidence base, at its best, would be rich and detailed; create a model that might be adapted for understanding other practices that take time and resources, that accrue meaning and value indirectly, and support of which is both critical and challenging. It would also create rarely seen insights into how to invest in longform creative practice over time.

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