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Attending to change: Dynamic drafting as creative practice research in contemporary retellings of medieval Icelandic literature

Abstract:
This article discusses the role of drafting as an iterative, dynamic aspect of creative writing that can form a component of practice-led methods with its own questions and research contributions. The article reflects on the author's experiences of field work undertaken in Iceland during the composition of a creative response to a medieval Icelandic saga. It then examines how substantial revisions that occur during the life of a project can form the basis for critical reflections that are, in turn, related to earlier scholarship about the source text. A major shift occurred in the author's creative project, from the original goal of writing an historical novel to the work's final iteration as contemporary crime fiction. This change is offered as a case study that suggests methods and question prompts for other writer-researchers wishing to incorporate changes in the drafting process as part of critical reflections about their aims and practice. In so doing, the article provides both evidence and practical guidance about the tangible and precise role that attending to changes during the drafting of a creative work can play in creative writing as a research method.

Biographical note:
Kári Gíslason is a writer and academic who teaches creative writing and literary studies at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). He is the author of *The Promise of Iceland* (University of Queensland Press, 2011) (UQP), which told the story of return journeys he's made to his birthplace, and the novels *The Ash Burner* (UQP, 2015) and *The Sorrow Stone* (UQP, 2022). He is also the co-author, with Richard Fidler, of *Saga Land* (HarperCollins, 2017), which won the Indie Book Award for Non-Fiction in 2018. His most recent book, the travel memoir *Running with Pirates*, was released with UQP in August 2024. In 2027, he will publish *To Catch a Fox* (HarperCollins), a crime fiction set in Iceland.

Keywords:
Creative practice research methods, creative writing as drafting, creative response, Sagas of Icelanders, crime fiction

Introduction

In September 2022, I stayed near the small town of Stykkishólmur, on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula in mid-western Iceland, in order to undertake field research for an historical novel recounting the life of the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Þorgrímsson. He lived from 963–1031, mostly on the same peninsula at the farm of Helgafell, "Holy Mountain". Famous in Iceland, the property derives its name from a basalt plug that had reportedly once opened to allow a fallen warrior to enter the feast of Valhalla (*Eyrbyggja saga*, Chapter 11), and that later became the home of Iceland's first nun (*Laxdæla saga*, Chapter 78). That is, it was holy to both Icelanders' pagan and Christian ancestors, and, like many key sites in medieval Icelandic stories, is integrated into descriptions of the religious change that occurred in the year 1000 AD, when the country adopted Christianity and elected to set aside the Old Norse gods.

Snorri Þorgrímsson, who was a young man during the Christianisation, witnessed significant cultural change and was a proponent of it, advocating for the new faith (*Kristni saga*, Chapter 11). Accounts of his life are found in a number of the *Íslendingasögur*, or sagas of Icelanders. This is a group of forty works that narrate the lives of those who first settled in Iceland, a migration that began in the 9th century predominantly from Norway but also other parts of Scandinavia, as well as England, Scotland and Ireland. The action of the sagas of Icelanders ranges from the settlement years to a few decades after the adoption of Christianity. Among these works, *Eyrbyggja saga*, which can be translated as *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, offers the most information about Snorri. Though a multifarious work with an episodic structure that admits a wide range of tales about the peninsula (of which Eyri in the title is a part), *Eyrbyggja saga* nevertheless gives considerable attention to Snorri, offering insights into his character, family life, and the disputes that allowed him to advance an ambitious political career.

My project was to involve retelling Snorri's life in the form of a historical novel and was motivated by a desire to use creative writing as a research method to describe and interpret Snorri's rivalry with another chieftain, Arnkell Þórólfsson, one that eventually led to Snorri's killing of Arnkell (*Eyrbyggja saga*, Chapter 37). In particular I hoped that a historical novel based on a mixture of medieval source materials and speculative biography might contribute new questions to earlier scholarship on the characterisation of Snorri, which has progressed in the fields of Old Norse-Icelandic literary studies and medieval Scandinavian history. In so doing the project would build on my earlier application of creative practice research methods in Old Norse-Icelandic studies that resulted in two books, a co-authored hybrid work of travel and memoir called *Saga Land: The Island of Stories At The Edge of The World* (Fidler & Gíslason, 2017) and a historical novel *The Sorrow Stone* (Gíslason, 2022). In articles about these books for *postmedieval* (Gíslason, 2021; Gíslason & Bennett, 2023), I argue that adaptation and retelling of medieval Icelandic sagas in contemporary forms can function as a catalyst for new research questions. In the case of the *Saga Land* project, the multimodal nature of sagas as oral tradition, written narrative, and manuscript collections was explored in a range of contemporary storytelling modes: theatre performance, situated storytelling, and a compendium-style book of Icelandic stories. Meanwhile, *The Sorrow Stone* adopted the point of view of a secondary character in another of the sagas of Icelanders, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*,

in a way that showed how the perspective of ancillary characters could be explored in more detail and with empathy using narrative techniques of fiction, especially limited first-person point of view.

In this paper I would like to extend this discussion of practice-led research in Old Norse-Icelandic studies by engaging more fully with the role of the drafting process in creative writing, and how major changes in the direction of a written piece can form part of one's research findings. By the time I'd completed a full draft of my novel about Snorri Þorgrímsson, there had been a shift in its form and content, from historical fiction set in the 10th and 11th centuries to a contemporary crime fiction about a murder that occurs in 1985 and is reinvestigated in 2024. Below I will relate this change in the form and genre of the novel to discussions of drafting and field research in creative writing, in order to ask how significant changes in the design of a creative response to a medieval text can form part of how we read and interpret the source texts. Before that, I offer a discussion of the critical literature on *Eyrbyggja saga* and earlier creative responses to it in order to ask how the "rootedness of the Íslendingasögur in their landscape settings" (Lethbridge, 2016, p. 67), and consequently a writer's drafting while in that landscape, can operate as a key element a reading and adaptation of a saga of this kind. In the final part of this paper I consider why it was that adopting the genre of crime fiction felt like a *necessary* shift in the design of a project that sought to respond sympathetically to the source text and its landscape settings. I also offer a series of questions that I believe can be of use to scholars and writers wishing to include specific critical reflections on the dynamism inherent in drafting in their use of creative writing as a research method. This article contributes to creative writing studies more broadly by adding new perspectives to earlier discussions of drafting as a component of practice-led research.

The source text

Eyrbyggja saga relates events of the 10th and 11th centuries. However, like other sagas of Icelanders, the extant version of the saga dates from much later, from the 13th century (Tulunius, 2013, pp. 125–131), a period of substantial literary activity in Iceland. The saga was composed anonymously and most probably had antecedents in oral traditions of the Snæfellsnes region. Given the time gap between events described in the saga and their recording in manuscript form, *Eyrbyggja saga* has an uncertain historicity. In general, the main content of sagas of Icelanders consists of disputes between leading families and regional leaders, and witness a society beset by feud-driven violence and intergenerational conflict. They are a source of information about the early division of the island's farming land and about the establishment of parliaments and courts. Yet, while the sagas reveal an understanding of the island society as a collective whole, with both central and local parliaments and judiciaries, and often allude to international contexts and events, they are predominantly family-driven narratives, and for this reason are also referred to as the *family sagas*.

Another common feature of this group of sagas is a prose style with a seemingly objective point of view that does not narrate characters' inner lives in detail. As a result, to modern readers, the stories seem to pay little heed to the turmoil of the protracted and destructive disputes that

they witness. It is certainly the case, as historian Neil Price points out, that these stories are interwoven with the "full range of human emotions" (Price, 2021, p. 18). They refer to love, joy, grief, and other feelings (Þorgeirsdóttir 2020, pp. 18–19, 30–31) and some characters also compose verses that express emotions – most famously, the "Sonatorrek" poem uttered by the warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson after the death of his son (*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Chapter 79). Yet, most often the full picture of the characters' emotional lives is left for the reader to infer.

Similarly, the sagas of Icelanders can seem rather indifferent to their landscape settings, at least in comparison with how we might conceive of a story's relationship with setting since Romantic literature. The sagas are careful to include information about property claims and boundaries, travel routes, weather, farming yields, and the location of key events such as fights, ceremonies, and assemblies (Lethbridge, *Icelandic Saga Map*). But, with some exceptions, they tend not to refer to the beauty or dramatic impact of the Icelandic landscape and make little mention of geological occurrences such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. That is, the landscape setting of the sagas is presented in functional language that can lead to a somewhat misleading impression of narrative detachment from it (see Hennig, 2019).

Another point of difference from modern outlooks and contemporary literary sensibilities arises from the legal and political systems that the sagas depict. Early Icelandic society had laws and courts but did not have an executive arm of government, and so it fell to individuals and local leaders to prosecute cases and execute judgments themselves (see Miller, 1990, Chapter 1 & pp. 303–307), including those, like outlawry, that allowed an opponent in a legal matter to be killed by the successful party in the dispute (Byock, 1988, p. 26). Violence, as it is represented in the sagas, was an accepted part of how individuals in a stateless legal system managed conflict, protected their rights, and asserted their social and political ambitions. As a result, in works such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, we find leading regional figures, known as chieftains or *goðar* (sg. *goði*, also translated as "Priest" for the role included religious functions), manipulating the legal disputes of others to advance their own political aims, a legal situation that can lead to stories with a very diverse cast of characters entangled in wide-ranging conflicts.

Chieftains were expected to support their followers, but a key skill also lay discerning which cases to pursue aggressively and which to steer towards peaceful or negotiated settlement. Two of the main characters in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri goði and Arnkell goði, were chieftains living in close geographical proximity in Álftafjörður, and therefore were very aware of each other's networks of legal allegiances, family members, and friends. But, in contrast to Arnkell's affable nature and popular standing in the community of the saga (see, for instance, *Eyrbyggja saga*, Chapter 20), Snorri is portrayed as tactical and cold, and less physically capable than others, with a reputation "based on shrewdness rather than on physical prowess" (Byock, 1988, p. 191). Both he and Arnkell are sometimes seen to take steps to avoid conflict, but eventually a dispute develops between them and their followers, leading to an attack by Snorri and his supporters on Arnkell. In the fight that follows, Arnkell defends himself valiantly, taking a defensive position on his own, near a haystack, while he is attacked from all sides. But he can only hold out for so long and eventually is killed (Chapter 37). This moment in the saga

confirms Snorri goði's dominance in the region and satisfies his followers' desire to see Snorri act decisively and violently against his enemies.

Thus, Arnkell's death is a defining moment in Snorri goði's political career. *Eyrbyggja saga* narrates the conflict, and other key events in Snorri's life, succinctly and in a way that leaves room for what is, even by the standards of the form, an unusually large number of other stories and characters – a network of connected stories and points of view that formed part of the characters' understanding of their lives and obligations. Early criticism of the saga sometimes disapproved of this diffuse structure (Turville-Petre, 1953, p. 242; see also Livesay, 1988, p. 181), which critics have noted as lacking unity of purpose. As a result, the saga is sometimes described as a collection of tales patched together by regional interest in the peninsula (Garmonsway, 1937–45, p. 81), and, in the words of Marjorie Burns, "notoriously difficult" to read. Burns adds, instead of "following the lineal progression typical of other sagas, *Eyrbyggja saga* jumps back and forth between various ongoing plots, making synopsis all but impossible" (nd, np).

Yet, a more positive framing of the saga's organisation has been underway since at least 1959, when Lee M. Hollander used a structuralist reading to argue for the skill and purposefulness in the saga's "exceedingly multifarious" (p. 222) stories. Also applying a structuralist approach in 1982, Carol Clover noted,

> the interweaving in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not abnormal, it is merely more elaborate [than in other sagas]. It is also a more exposed example because it is not absorbed in a larger climax structure: the interweaving cannot be construed as the intricate working out of a climactic prehistory, but is a contrived effect, complete in itself. (p. 79).

Clover, however, also concedes that this is, "a saga without a main character. If Snorri goði emerges as such, he does so only by dint of ubiquity, not because his biography has been developed in any normal sense. His history is spotty at best" (p. 78).

More recently, scholars have tended to follow Hollander's and Clover's sympathetic approach to the saga in identifying thematic richness amidst its structural complexity. Vésteinn Ólason connects the thematic and structural progressions of the work, from a "picture of a chaotic and half-wild society" in its early parts towards "a certain order that is gradually strengthened as the story progresses" (2003, p. xxv). Jennifer Livesay argues that earlier attempts to solve the saga's apparently disorderly structure overlook the prominent role of women and witchcraft (1988, p. 183), while Carl Phelpstead, adopting an ecocritical reading, suggests the saga shows a consistent concern with the "opposition between nature and nation" (2014, p. 18; see, related, Ian Wyatt's 2004 study of the use of weather and landscape in the action of the saga). A number of scholars have also argued that the theme of paternity is central. In 1999, Catherine Jorgensen Itnyre noted Arnkell's problems with his violent father, Þórólfr *bægifótr* (usually translated as "lame foot"), as an example of the "affective nature of the tie" (p. 173) between fathers and sons in the sagas (pp. 187, 189). Torfi Tulinius contends that an important distinction is made in the saga "between two types of dead fathers, those who stay dead and those who will not

rest in their graves" (2014, p. 204). In this schema, Snorri is empowered by a noble ancestry, while Arnkell is dragged down by his father, who turns against him while alive and becomes equally difficult to control when dead. Similarly, Santiago Barreiro and Julián Valle have related what they see as Arnkell's political vulnerability to "his strong attachment to his family, even when this is contrary to his political aims" (2021, p. 29).

Earlier creative responses to *Eyrbyggja saga*

While the scholarly reception of *Eyrbyggja saga* could be characterised as a story of growing appreciation of the work's complexity and thematic richness, a history of responses by modern writers suggests that its episodic structure has never been seen as an impediment to adaptation for creative projects. Indeed, the saga has seemed well-suited to being cut up into manageable portions to retell.

One of the saga's most famous episodes, for example, about the so-called "marvels" of Fróðá river, has been retold by George Edmund Ottis in 1874 (*Thurid and Other Poems*), Robert Louis Stevenson in 1914 (*The Waif Woman*), and Jóhann Frímann in 1938 (*Fróðá*). In the source text, the episode concerns a Hebridean woman named Þórgunna, who arrives at Fróðá farm on the peninsula with a chest of fine bed furnishings, which are soon coveted by the mistress of the farm, Þuríðr. Þórgunna dies and returns as a ghost who is intensely vigilant of people's manners and their adherence to rules of hospitality, as well as angry with Þuríðr, who has laid claim to the bed furnishings.

In Stevenson's rendering of the Þórgunna episode, composed while he was living in Samoa, the writer dwells on a rivalry between Þórgunna and Þuríðr, especially in their respective abilities to attract the sexual attention of younger men. Þórgunna's singing, Stevenson writes, is such that "the young men forgot the word of the merchants as to the woman's age, and their looks followed her all night" (*The Waif Woman*, np). While themes of sexual desire and jealousy between female characters are certainly present in the source text, Stevenson engages more fulsomely with the situation's psychological aspects by placing his characters' inner lives at the heart of the tale. In so doing, he offers a version of the story that reminds us that a creative response consists of both retelling and interpretive reading. At the same time, we see that a modern literary emphasis on desire and the emotional lives of characters, within a more pronounced domestic context (Thibodeaux, 2019, p. 5, p.90), can form the basis of expansion of saga episodes that, in the source texts, may be succinct in comparison.

We find a similar example of heightened subjectivity (for the purpose of expanding an element of the source text) in Ármann Jakobsson's more recent retelling of parts of the saga in novel form (*Glæsir*, 2011) that explores the character of a revenant, Arnkell *goði*'s father, Þórólfr *bægifótr*, who, after his death, inhabits a bull named Glæsir (*Eyrbyggja saga*, Chapter 63). Elsewhere, Jakobsson has commented that his primary aim in writing creative responses to the sagas has not been to mediate the source texts but rather use them "as inspiration to create compelling fiction" (2019, p. 308); that is, fidelity to the source text and its formal qualities is a less central concern than the narrative direction and questions raised by the act of retelling.

Jakobsson seems willing to be directed by the questions his characters put to him while he drafts his creative response. In *Glæsir*, the result is greater attention given to the experiences of secondary characters who do not usually attract sympathy in the source texts. However, while Jakobsson's work gives us overlooked points of view, we might also say *Eyrbyggja saga* – through an unusual narrative structure that collects a wide range of stories – prompts responses that isolate and expand on the lives of marginal figures. That is, one effect of the saga *not* adopting a unified feud structure or main biography, with more clearly identified main characters and climactic events, is to encourage the reader's attention to range across the saga's entire cast.

In Jeff Janoda's 2005 retelling of *Eyrbyggja saga* (*Saga: A Novel of Medieval Iceland*), the saga's wide range of interests finds modern emphasis in the perspective of a freed slave named Úlfar, who, as in the source text, is in the precarious position of being surrounded by more powerful regional leaders who are happy to sacrifice him to achieve their own ends. And, in Michael Ridpath's 2014 crime fiction *Sea of Stone*, the writer incorporates an episode about the arrival on the peninsula of two berserker warriors from Sweden, ancillary characters in the saga, who are killed off after they have built a path through a lava field. In *Sea of Stone*, the story of the berserkers' demise forms an ancient counterpoint to a sense of dread felt by a principal character, Ollie, who is returning to Iceland twenty years after he left to live in America at the age of ten (pp. 30–31).

Eyrbyggja saga's form as a collection of stories has encouraged writers' creative choices in using and expanding ancillary points of view, isolating and amplifying the episodes that interest them most. However, in my case, the original goal was rather different: I hoped to write a unified narrative that offered a biography of Snorri, founded on a feud structure that would be familiar to readers of other sagas of Icelanders, with a central dispute developing incrementally towards a climactic final exchange. As mentioned above, that story did not eventuate. I would like to turn now to the changes that occurred during the drafting process, and how these changes reflected my engagement with the landscape setting of the saga and the dynamics of the creative writing drafting process. My aim is to show how the saga seemed to insist on an acceptance of its diffuseness and multiplicity as part of my creative response, but that unity of composition nevertheless emerged in the connection of landscape setting and a variety of points of view. As a result, the task, as it evolved during the drafting process, was not to replace the saga's diffuseness with an alternative structure, but rather to find a contemporary form that could accommodate a combination of unity and digression.

Dynamic drafting and visiting the landscape settings of *Eyrbyggja saga*

The notion that creative writing is a dynamic process consisting of iterative cycles of drafting, editing, and rewriting is a well-established one that acknowledges that "doing the writing itself generates further ideas leading to further writing" (Frieman, 2015, p. 128) and that "part of the experience of writing as discovery is that one writes to find out what one wants to say". (Frieman, 2015, p. 129). As Graeme Harper observes in a discussion of drafting as a dynamic process, the practice of creative writing "is clearly located in our actions", which "involve the

work of the mind (thinking, inventing, remembering, combining sensory information and non-sensory information, structuring, reconstructing) in what is a decidedly energetic exchange" (2020, pp. 11–12). Such an exchange is unpredictable and often non-linear, as iterative models of creativity often involve "late-stage activities focused on selection and elaboration of ideas", as "there is no fixed order in which individuals should engage in these activities; rather, switching between activities is both inevitable and necessary" (Tolkamp, et al. 2025, p. 27). As Giovanni Emanuele Corazza writes, the "larger part of the creative process is carried out without any evidence nor guarantee for success" (2016, p. 260), meaning that creativity is "the search for potential originality and effectiveness" (p. 261, my emphasis) rather than the achievement of a particular outcome or product (see further Green et al., 2024, pp. 548–555).

During field research, the iterative and dynamic nature of creative writing drafting is accompanied by close observation of landscape settings and the social and environmental context of the work. For Michael Sala, a defining feature of a novel

> is not so much its use of language but rather its use of observation. As writers we not only make observations or flesh out our individual subjectivity, but to some extent we also learn how to reverse that subjectivity in order to perceive ourselves in our context with all its limitations and opportunities. (2022, p. 3)

Similarly, Helen Bastow's description of starting a journal of observations and reflections during the creative process would resonate with many: "When I began the novel I intuited the need to keep the journal. I felt that I was about to leave on a journey, which would necessarily involve going through an experience of not knowing where I was" (2003, p. 3). She adds,

> The research journal believes me. It helps keep the content of the novel and the creative thesis alive to its poetic ear – the ear tuned to the subversive or unconscious voice, and what it wants to say. An ear that is aided by the unstructured nature of the writing in the journal, and its process, one of rumination, and talking to yourself, when only your unconscious is listening. (p. 11)

The conception of a journal as an object that listens to you while also forming part of one's dialogue with landscape and a repository of one's imagination, memory, and creative design attributes a degree of agency to the document in a way that is similar to how writers sometimes describe their characters' apparent wilfulness. Characters' ability to surprise writers – in a sense, disobeying authorial design – is often seen as a good sign for the success of a written work, for it suggests that the drafting process is developing its own momentum. That is, the story and characters have taken on a creative integrity that is both an expression of the writer's goals and a reflection of how they have evolved and changed. The writer's muse, as it was once described, is taking control of the project, while the writer undertakes, in Shady Cosgrove's words, "a passive activity as creator … the writer as observer, and the object of observation is their own consciousness" (2024, p. 105; see also pp. 106–107 for other examples of writers' experiences of stories seeming to steer themselves).

It is difficult to be precise about the impact of this aspect of drafting, for its relevance will depend on the personality and perceptions of the writer. So-called "extended mind theories" argue that the mind can be externalised in tools and objects, an approach that has been used in creative writing studies and may help to explain how drafts and journals appear to listen and speak back to the writer (Frieman, 2014, p. 49). We might also point to what Harper calls the "realness" of drafting, or how "the evidence of a physical presence of writing, suggests the possibility of a completed piece of writing emerging during a process that is both individualised and socialised, designed to work most commonly between an internal creating and an external inscribing" (2020, p. 6). That is, the draft begins to promise a completed work, one that exists as an expression of your thoughts on the page but will ultimately have a life and presence of its own – both in its final created form and in its reception among reader.

During the field research I conducted in Iceland, my early goals for an historical novel were soon complicated by travels on the peninsula, where *Eyrbyggja saga* was set, and in the journal entries that I made in response to the landscape setting of the source text. At first, these travels and observations were concentrated on Álftafjörður and Helgafell, on the northern coast of the peninsula and where Snorri spent most of his life. But gradually, I approached the saga less for what it had to say about Snorri – mining it for what *I* needed for his biography – and more as a set of instructions, with the episodes of the work determining my destinations each day. As a result, I travelled much more widely than I had first intended and came to want to go to all the places mentioned in the saga. I made numerous visits further west along the peninsula to Fróðá, where Þórgunna had brought her fine linen, as well as to Berserkjagata, where the Swedish berserkers included in Ridpath's *Sea of Stone* met their ends. And other sites, such as, Mávahlíð and Búlandshöfði, locations closer to Fróðá that are connected to a witch named Katla and her son Oddur; Hofsstaðir, which is near Helgafell and where the settler Þórólfur established a farm; and Dritsker, the subject of a well-known fight about the contentious issue of where people might relieve themselves during local assemblies.

In this way, the multifarious nature of the saga directed my travels in an episodic and non-linear way that was also a touch concerning: the landscape and the saga's structure were acquiring a disruptive energy that was distracting, and not really in service of the project, at least while I held onto my original goals. Yet, at the same time, this way of engaging with the saga was bringing me closer to its own relationship with landscape. As Emily Lethbridge comments,

> A base-level familiarity with or knowledge of any saga narrative (whether from direct access to manuscript texts via reading/listening, or via impromptu oral retellings) meant that in outdoor contexts, these narratives would have been present in people's consciousness too, to varying degrees, as they existed in and moved around the landscapes in which the saga narratives are set. Here the recalling (and perhaps retelling) of narrative material was first and foremost determined by the landscape, rather than the order in which events are presented in the written texts, so people would have 'read' the sagas in a non-linear and fundamentally intertextual fashion by necessity. (2016, p. 75)

Similarly, my field research became a series of digressive excursions suggested by the saga's episodes – an iterative cycle of saga reading and observation that de-emphasised narrative unity and gave prominence to the role of the landscape as both host of these stories and a central part of their design and meaning. I had not abandoned my idea for a historical biography, but I was coming to see that this biography would be a response to the landscape setting of the Snæfellsnes region, a "reciprocal and recursive relationship between saga narrative, narrative stage, and the known or 'real' world in which those who first put the sagas down in writing lived and knew" (Lethbridge 2016, p. 71). The saga, as I experienced it at that point, was resisting my attempts to adapt it into a more unified, singular narrative.

Dynamic drafting, *Eyrbyggja saga* and the shift to crime fiction

For some time, though, I continued to plan and draft a historical novel or biography. I decided to narrate Snorri's story from the point of view of an invented figure I called "the Saga Man", a storyteller who was gathering material about Snorri for a saga that he was composing about Snæfellsnes. The immediate temporal setting was the end of Snorri's life: the Saga Man arrives at Snorri's farm to speak to him about his feud with rival chieftain Arnkell. Along the way, in the form of backstory, the reader is given a fuller biography of Snorri that I would source from his other appearances in the saga and other medieval Icelandic works. The majority of the action in this version would take place in Helgafell, Snorri's birthplace, and in Álftafjörður, where he was brought up, and where Arnkell lived, and where the fight that ended in Arnkell's death occurred. I left Iceland with this design in place. Back at home in Brisbane, I began to collate notes, drawings, photos and videos that I had from my field research and organised them into a sequence of slides featuring character profiles and collages of setting. I see now that these slides were the first step towards a revision of my creative response, because the effect was to isolate individual points of view and backstory elements as self-contained narrative elements or functions of the text rather than connected steps in a central line of events in a main characters' story.

I wasn't able to work on the novel again until a year after I'd stayed in Iceland, that is, towards the end of 2023. Then, after a few months, I set aside the project again during a period of teaching. In May 2024, when I returned to it, I referred again to the notes and photographs and slides. To absorb them, I drew a map of my travels of 2022, with the journal entries guiding what to include. It was during this process of mapping that there was a change in the language I used to describe the novel's characters: I began to refer to them as "suspects". The term emerged quite unexpectedly, as an aside. That is, I didn't really *come up* with the idea. But it was one that I immediately felt reflected how the work was developing towards a portrait of a wide cast, a "network novel" (Gudmundsdottir & Meany, 2020, p. 4) with characters who seemed each to be demanding a heightened point of view. Naturally, not every character was guilty of the killing at the heart of the novel, but they all had significant parts in the story and its landscape setting – much in the way that the suspects in crime fiction are given significant roles, even if they are not the culprit.

Once the word "suspect" was on the page, the possibility of recasting the novel as a form of crime fiction also took shape, and the drafting process steered towards a genre in which digression is not only tolerated but often key to the organisation of clues and threads. Whodunnits, in particular, present a range of possible explanations for a crime, many of which will turn out to be *not* very important in solving the mystery. The path taken by the detective figure, or equivalent solver of the crime, can be a winding one and involve frustration until, that is, they finally crack the case. As Heta Pyrhönen explains,

> the action sequence of the investigation structures the narrative, as it opens with the problem of crime and closes with its solution. Often the consequences of crime are revealed well before the events that led up to it become known. Typically, this situation structures detective fiction – but backwards: its plot aims at establishing a linear, chronological sequence of events that will eventually explain its baffling initial situation. It is generally agreed that form and especially plot structure make the detective story the kind of narrative it is. (2010, p. 44)

Along the way to finding the linear explanation, the detective's search and "circuitous routes" (Gillis & Gudmundsdottir, 2020, p. 4) allow for the portrait of many different people and sides of a community. Often that portrait is accompanied by a very pronounced use of landscape setting, one that is akin to the function of setting in Gothic literature. As a result, crime fiction in general, and Nordic noir very particularly, make strong connections between the depiction of crimes and of locations (Neijmann, 2020, p. 90; Gillis & Gudmundsdottir, 2020, p. 14). In Icelandic works, for example, the detective is often seen to be returning from an urban centre to a more rural and remote one that is also the scene of their own past trauma and family rupture. This journeying back involves renewing neglected relations with friends and family and the retrieval of memories that until then have been repressed or ignored, in a way that figures place as a repository of those memories (see, for example, Neijmann, 2020 for a discussion of Arnaldur Indriðason's crime fiction in this regard). The detective, who occupies a liminal position of both belonging and not belonging to the area to which they've returned, must re-establish their relations with people from their past while also retaining enough critical distance and strength of purpose to collect evidence and solve the crime. That is, narrative momentum and the solving of a crime develop in response to their need to reassess their reading of the landscape and its stories.

This relationship between place, characterisation, and the collection of diffuse story elements was at the heart of my project, and, as I have discussed earlier, also central to how the sagas anticipate and engage their audiences' knowledge of setting – their "reciprocal and recursive relationship" (Lethbridge, 2016, p. 71) of landscape and the recalling of stories in situ. That is, a form of characterisation in Nordic noir gave me a literary device by which to collect diffuse story elements in a way that I felt related to and celebrated Eyrbyggja saga's narrative diffuseness and attention to setting. The novel that resulted, To Catch a Fox (in print), is a crime fiction set on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula in 1985 and 2024. Its main character is no longer Snorri or the Saga Man but a journalist, Haukur, who has left a newspaper job in Reykjavík and who, with time on his hands, returns to his childhood home (Álftafjörður) to investigate a crime that he witnessed four decades earlier. At the age of 12, Haukur discovered the body of a young

male farmer, Arni (based on Arnkell goði), buried under a stack of hay in one of the fields of the fjord where they lived. The case was left unsolved by the police, but Haukur, who had a close friendship with the young man, is determined to re-open it. One of the suspects, a doctor, Páll, who lives at Helgafell, shares character traits with Snorri goði: he is rather manipulative and can be very cold, but he is also intelligent, and his plans often benefit others. Likewise, Haukur has much in common with the Saga Man character I had originally chosen as a narrator: he is narrating and interpreting the past while also attempting to understand his own and others' fragmented memory of it. The story is no longer a linear historical fiction focused on one character, but rather a regional tale comprising a wide cast of suspects whose perspectives are brought together because of an investigation. Haukur becomes the gatherer of the information and regional stories, his search a unifying element in a work of disparate narrative elements.

Conclusion: Attending to changes during the drafting process

As I mentioned earlier, a feature of creative writing drafting as a research method is iterative processes that encourage substantial revisions to occur during the entire life of a project. In the dynamic drafting of a creative work, a writer may even be relieved to find themselves ceding artistic control to the characters and settings of their works. This is because many creative writers trust in a conception of creativity as a process that yields questions and answers as it progresses. Attending to these changes in a critically self-aware way can result in more complete artistic works and allow changes to be part of a research methodology that examines why and how these changes occurred. Based on my own experiences, I offer the following questions as prompts for reflection on changes that occur during the drafting process:

1. Was there an impediment in the drafting of the creative work that could only be addressed through a change in the project design and direction?
2. What combination of research and writing factors influenced that change?
3. Did the change result in a reconceptualisation of the project as a whole?
4. Did the change result in a greater sense of self-awareness of one's creative aims and practice?
5. In the case of creative responses to earlier texts, did the change in the creative work result in a different understanding about the source text or prompt new questions about the scholarship relating to it?

My own answers for the novel I wrote are primarily concerned with how I responded to the diffuse structure of Eyrbyggja saga, and the influence of the field research I undertook. The impediment that I faced (1) was that the saga as a source text did not seem to support the kind of unified historical novel focused on a single main character that I wished to write. My realisation of this impediment was heightened by field research in the landscape setting of the novel (2), for it was during this time that I saw that the saga was in fact unified in its relation to place, a coherence that manifested in an episodic, non-linear narrative that allowed for a wide range of viewpoints and stories to be collected. As a result, I began to reconceptualise the creative project as being primarily about form (3) rather than about the use of the source text's content as story material. That is, my creative response to the source text sought the adoption

of an episodic structure and multiple points of view. Intertextual elements remained (especially in the personalities of main characters), but the novel took shape in a form that supported a greater range of viewpoints and social contexts to be explored.

I was surprised by a sense of fidelity to the form of the saga and its landscape setting that influenced my writing (4). But, when I followed the direction that the drafting took, my goal seemed not to retell Snorri's life but rather to draw more direct inspiration from the literary qualities of the saga that contained it. If I wanted to do this, I could embrace rather than seek to replace the saga's unusual structure. In this, the process of change during the drafting process was similar to a much longer story of change that had occurred in the scholarship relating to the saga (5), which has come to appreciate the work's complexity as a form of artistic intent rather than a failing or limitation.

The changes that made during the life of a creative project are more than improvements measured in relation to the success or otherwise of the final product. As a research methodology, observations of dynamic drafting as a writing process in response to Eyrbyggja saga offer further evidence of the potential for relating scholarship of the sagas of Icelanders and creative writing techniques. In this project, they could be connected to scholarly approaches to the sagas that have read for thematic richness and engagement with episodic, regional storytelling. Altering my creative response became a form of critical engagement that brought together text, travel and observation, and landscape, and so moved the project closer to scholarship on medieval modes of audience engagement with the sagas. In the landscape setting of the saga, I was able to see the source text's open and holistic storytelling approach, and this allowed me to accept its artistic strengths more specifically in terms of its use of setting, point of view, and digression. The outcome, a crime novel set in contemporary Iceland, emerged from the nature of creative writing drafting as a dynamic process: one of transitional moments that exist, in their own right, as tangible points of analysis and interpretation.

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