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Writing death and the Gothic

Despite being imaged all around us in writing, popular culture and the media, death and dying are, it often seems, the last taboo subjects in modern society. This special issue of *TEXT* brings together a series of articles on the topic of 'Writing death and the Gothic', many of which have been developed from papers presented at the inaugural Australasian Death Studies Network conference, which was held in Noosa, Queensland, in October 2015. This one-day multi-disciplinary conference brought together discussion and investigation from a range of cultural, humanities and social areas that consider death and dying, including creative arts, popular culture, health and community planning. One of the editors of this special issue, Lorna Piatti-Farnell, opened the conference with a keynote speech entitled 'The Politics of Undying: Vampire Genetics and the Cultural Politics of Immortality'. Through an analysis of health and disease, life and death, mortality and immortality, Piatti-Farnell's presentation enquired into the representation of the vampire in contemporary fiction, showing how, in an era dominated by scientific experimentation and technological advances, the undying nature of the vampiric body unveils underlying concerns about the current state of humanity − in physical, conceptual, and political terms. This keynote speech set the tone for the conference, and prompted many points of reference and engaged discussion.

In terms of this special issue, many delegates used creative writing as the basis for, or focus of, their analyses and addressed topics including: representations of death, dying and the undead in creative writing and popular culture; narratives of death and dying in Australasian history and popular memory; and, the difficulties and opportunities involved in writing and reading about death and dying. Other writing-related topics included writing crime fiction and memoirs of dying, basing research projects on the topic of death and dying and related subjects, and profiles of pedagogies in creative and professional writing that use material dealing with death and dying. There was also an interesting and strong strand of research that could be characterised as arising from Contemporary Gothic studies in the papers presented. A number of these were collected in a special issue of *Aerternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies* which was published earlier this year (see McAllister and Brien 2016). A a number of other papers on the Gothic presented at the conference also strongly intersected with an interest in writing.

This connection between writing, death and the Gothic should not come as a surprise, considering not only the Gothic's conceptual roots in literary forms, but also its

profound debt to the politicised representation of transgression, death and un/death. Literary Studies, for its part, has maintained a clear interest in the multiple incarnations of the Gothic over centuries, both analytically and representationally. This interest is, of course, echoed in wider popular culture, where the presence of the Gothic narrative – from film to television, comics, graphics novels, and even games – is 'omnipresent' (Edwards and Monnet 2012: 2). A perception endures that, as far as creative writing goes, the Gothic has found less than favourable ground for its development. And yet, the current influx of Gothic-themed novels – which cover several aspects of both death and un/death, often over-spilling into the supernatural world of vampires and zombies – prove the persistent desire writers have to engage with the different, the strange and the Other (Chaplin 2011; Piatti-Farnell 2014). Indeed, this critical direction is also identifiable in the various forms of life-writing, where the perceived personal nature of memoirs and autobiographies is aided – at least representationally – by the Gothic's focus on the tortured, the difficult and the culturally transgressive (Brien 2015).

The articles in this issue include both scholarly and creative works as – and presented as – research, as well as hybrid forms. These works deal with a wide range of topics around the theme of 'writing death and the Gothic', whether these be writing death, writing the Gothic, or writing both death and the Gothic.

In his article, 'This phantom gibbet: writing through/as melancholy', Ross Watkins explores the paradoxical nature of narrative writing about death. Using a range of forms – poetry by Keats, memoir by Malouf and fiction by Banville – Watkins interestingly explores such writing as a process by which authors can not only remove the melancholic from their experience, but construct what he calls 'a container' for the melancholy object. Kathryn Trees' article, 'Death as a threshold: being with a person as they are dying', notes that while there are a multitude of representations of death and dying in such forms as non-fiction and fiction writing, film and television entertainment, documentaries and the news, there is limited writing about everyday, personal experiences of dying and death. Trees posits that this is perhaps because we find the personal too intimate to disclose, or the language and grammar we use is inadequate. Trees points to some ways to approach these topics.

Leanne Dodds moves this issue of representation into genre fiction in her 'Dead men can talk: voicing the dead in crime fiction', which discusses how readers want not only an idea what death looks like, but also to understand death through the voice of the victim. In investigating the changing purpose of the dead body within crime fiction, Dodd identifies a range of narrative strategies that writers use to give the dead a voice in crime novels. In 'Confronting the dark: using practice-led research to write about death', Karen M. Klima describes how her own experiences prompted her practice-led process of writing which was informed by Continental philosophical and other theories of death. Klima identifies both the need for open communication about death and suggests that it is important for the dying to feel that their life holds some significance for others.

'Deaths that wound: the traumatic potential of ghost stories' by Samuel Finegan highlights the potential that ghost fiction, as a form of writing about death, offers

authors – and especially those who set out to translate historical and social trauma into a form accessible to readers. Jay Kylie Ludowyke steps into this area of what could be called 'in-between life and death-ness' in her exploration of how inanimate objects can be animated into assertive 'things' by skilled creative writers. Her 'Dead or alive? The animism of artefact in literature' further asserts that, once enlivened, an artefact can be seen to die twice.

Moving from the life narratives of objects to the memoirs of dying people, Donna Lee Brien writes about two recent Australian memoirs, Donald Horne and Myfanwy Horne's *Dying: A Memoir* (published in 2007) and Cory Taylor's *Dying: A Memoir* (published in 2016). In 'Making stories of our own ends: two Australian memoirs of dying', Brien, co-editor of this special issue, asserts that examining these texts can contribute to understanding both this autobiographical practice as well as the way some individuals deal with the prospect of their own impending ends. Mark Piccini's 'The excess of life and death in Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*' examines death and dying in these two novels, both published in 2004 and later translated into English. Erin Mercer's '"The wolf bane is blooming again": Gothic desire in R.H. Morrieson's *The Scarecrow*' also discusses creative writing, in this case the work of a little-analysed writer who uses the Gothic.Mercer posits that post-provincial writing in New Zealand can be seen as not just building on a local tradition of literary realism, but as engaging with a popular international tradition as well.

Nicole Anae's 'Writing murder: elements of Gothic horror in Matthew Milat's "meat axe" poetry' is a chillingly forensic investigation of the murder-inspired poetry of a real-life adolescent killer. The task of identifying elements of Gothic horror in this poetry is interwoven with courtroom and media evidence. The discussion in 'Morgue porn: a female gaze in forensic television' by Toni Risson takes another fresh look at writing the crime of murder, but this time through interrogating the new generation of forensic television (from 2000 on), where a disproportionate number of television pathologists are written as female. Belinda Hopper's 'If the Sky Should Fall: An exploration of how a novella can portray the grief of bereavement from a comparative worldviews perspective' discusses her research into how worldviews shape experiences of grief and loss, in relation to how this influenced her writing of a novella.

This issue also includes a series of powerful creative works in a range of genres on the theme of death and dying. 'Writing death: a personal essay' examines how author Irene Waters' childhood and career exposed her to death from an early age, providing her with her own theories of death and grieving, which she tests against the literature on these topics. A number of these creative works movingly deal with the loss of family members, using different forms of creative writing: Bambi Ward's personal essay 'Searching for missing graves: the agony and the ecstasy'; Amy Bennett's graphic memoir 'Two neat boxes'; Dominique Hecq's poetic 'Crypts of making', and Julia Prendergast's short story 'Clay lips and love'. All of these creative works, in their different ways, explore the range of human actions and emotions raised by death and loss, as well as the potentialities of these forms to contribute to both imaginative and research-driven narratives around death and dying. Denise Beckton's 'Exhuming

voices: repurposing historical texts for fiction narratives' brings the issue to a close in her investigation through creative writing of the death of the Easter Island culture, research which relates to current discourses around the fictionalisation of history and the controversy associated with fictionalising historical events.

All these articles and creative works thus mobilise one of key ideas animating the conference from which they arise, and were developed after: that writing and talking about death and dying requires taking account of a wide range of issues and attitudes. Individually, each article makes a contribution to these topics; together – as editors – we believe they form a considerable archive of contemporary material of interest in relation to writing death, dying and the Gothic. This special issue can only do so because of how intelligently and generously our contributors and the reviewers of this issue engaged with both this often challenging topic and the rigor required by the double-blind peer review process.

Works cited

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