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Enza Gandolfo***Take a walk in their shoes: Empathy and emotion in the writing process****Abstract*

Christos Tsiolkas said Dead Europe 'was a very difficult novel to write. It ... took me, in the writing of it, into dark and fearful places. As a writer you take on aspects of your characters and if you are not careful the world you are creating begins to blend with the world you actually inhabit' (Tsiolkas 2008). There is substantial research demonstrating the therapeutic benefits of writing about one's own traumas. But what are the challenges of writing fiction that requires imagining and creating traumatic events; evil, monstrous or tragic characters? If, as many argue, fiction makes readers more empathetic, it is because writers have created believable worlds that readers can inhabit. In order to create believable worlds that readers can inhabit these worlds and the characters that people them, writers have to inhabit their characters' lives. This can mean spending years in very dark places. In this article I explore the emotional and physical impact this has on writers and look at ways writers might manage what Marguerite MacRobert calls the 'emotional roller coaster' (MacRobert 2012). This is an autoethnographic article and my aim is to contribute to our understanding of the processes of creative writing by exploring and interrogating my experience of writing fiction about traumatic experiences.

Keywords: creative writing, trauma fiction, empathy and emotion

...the relationship between characters and their creators is symbiotic. An author's life influences his characters and a character's development influences the author. We may write about things we have never experienced directly, but as we write them, we experience in sensory and emotional detail, and they become real and merge with our real memories. The alchemy that you hope will move your audiences must first move you, so perhaps you end up having more than your fair share of emotion. (MacRobert 2012: 356)

Over the last couple of years I have been writing a novel, tentatively titled *The Fallen*. In its current draft, the first half of the novel is the story of Antonello a 21-year-old rigger who is working on the Westgate Bridge in Melbourne [1] when the central span on the west side of the bridge collapses and 35 men are killed, among them two of his closest friends. The second half of the novel is set 40 years later when a young woman in her early 20s who has had too much to drink loses control of her car and crashes into an embankment at the base of the Westgate Bridge. She survives the accident, but her best friend, Antonello's granddaughter, is killed on impact.

The question of what compels writers to write and then to write particular stories is one that writers, readers and critics have been asking for centuries, and there are ‘no shortage of answers’ (Richardson 2013: 154). For me, writing is first of all an act of exploration. Joan Didion puts it best when she says: ‘I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear’ (Didion 1976: 18). It is not the only reason I write – on another day there will be another answer/s – but it is what gets me started.

I have been thinking about the bridge, writing and avoiding writing about the bridge for many years. My obsession with the bridge and its stories began with the bridge’s collapse in 1970 when I was a 13-year-old school girl. My local high school was only a couple of kilometers from the bridge. Some of the students had fathers, brothers, uncles and boyfriends working on the bridge. We were working-class girls and most of our male, as well as many of our female relatives, worked in factories and building sites in equally dangerous conditions. My father was a boilermaker with his own share of near misses: a fall that nearly broke his back; an encounter with a faulty machine that sliced off half his thumb. The news of the collapse and the accompanying sense of dread spread quickly across the school. In more recent years, the Westgate Bridge has become a symbol of the ‘west’ (the working class western suburbs of Melbourne) and is often used on logos by local companies and institutions, but for many, especially those living in the western suburbs, it’s impossible to forget that it was one of Victoria’s worst industrial accidents. It carries with it questions about class and power, about the inequalities we take for granted.

I continue to live close to the bridge and see it several times a day. I drive across it regularly. For me, the bridge is surrounded by ghosts, not only of the men who died when it collapsed, but also of the many people, including a close friend, who have taken their own lives by leaping from the bridge into the river below. On quiet evenings walking along a path that winds under the bridge towards Williamstown or the Stony Creek Walkway that extends across the breakwater to the Yarra River, I hear the echoes of lost lives.

But actually the work on the novel did not start with Antonello, the rigger, or the collapse of the Westgate Bridge. It did not start with the Irish op shop volunteer I interviewed in 2007 who reawakened my interest when he reminded me of the men – many of them survivors of the collapse – who returned to finish building the bridge. The idea for the novel started with Jo, a young woman who had too much to drink one night, then got behind the wheel of a car and had an accident that killed her best friend. It is a familiar enough story; we’ve become accustomed to hearing it on the evening news, to seeing it dramatized in graphic Road Traffic Authority advertisements. Images of smashed cars, of grieving parents, of frustrated police officers, of young people and risk-taking behaviour that when combined with drinking and driving turns tragic.

Though my novel is not based on an actual accident, it was inspired by the story of one particular young woman. Described as sensible, quiet, hard working, this 26 year old went out with friends one Friday night and drank too much. Instead of taking a cab home she drove her car. She drove too fast and had an accident which left two young women dead, and another two permanently disabled. She was convicted of culpable driving and was sentenced to six years in prison. Of course she was irresponsible and culpable and as a consequence many other lives have been destroyed – not just the young women who died and were injured, but their friends and family. Judge Gaynor in handing down the sentence said, ‘There are no winners. It’s a lose-lose situation... I’m not dealing with someone who is a habitual criminal. It

just reeks of immaturity and recklessness' (Lowe 2009). It was this young woman's story that led me to questions about what it means to be someone who is responsible for such a devastating accident – to be an 'accidental killer' whether culpable or not – and these questions led to the writing of the novel.

Writing a novel is a long process (at least for me). For almost four years now I have been writing and reading and thinking about the impact of trauma, about culpability and guilt, and about the possibility of redemption. I have read as much as I can about 'accidental killers' and the impact of accidents on them. I have read two memoirs, *To Cause a Death* by Kelly Connor (2004) and *Half a Life* by Darin Strauss (2010), and *Accidental Impacts* a website set up by Maryann J Gray (no date), a social psychologist who was involved in an accident in which a child ran in front of her car and was killed. There is, as you would expect, a great deal of silence and silencing of those that are culpable in these accidents (Connor 2004). I have also read as much possible on the Westgate Bridge collapse including sections of the Royal Commission Report, Bill Hitchings' book *Westgate* (1979) and numerous newspaper articles.

I began work on *The Fallen* by immersing myself in the research and by writing to find my connection with the characters and to understand them and their lives. I had been working on the novel for several months when I began to notice that on writing days, I often felt anxious. This anxiety varied in intensity from tightness in the jaw and a sense of impending doom to a feeling of hopelessness and dread that kept me awake all night. The more I worked on the novel the more I found myself worrying about my characters, especially the young woman Jo, who was responsible for the death of her best friend. I worried about her and the impossibility of the situation I had created and then placed her in. This worrying was not distant, it was embodied and emotional. I felt Jo's despair and grief. But also Antonello's rage and Mandy's (Jo's mother) guilt.

Can I catch feelings from my characters? And if I do, what is the impact on 'the body that writes'? (Richardson 2013: 154). I am not suggesting 'an equivalence of experience between the writer of a traumatic text and the direct sufferer of the trauma', but rather I am asking as Richardson does in his article 'Writing Trauma: Affected in the Act', 'what price resides in the resonances that occur in writing trauma?' (Richardson 2013: 159). *The Fallen*, is a work of the imagination and I did not expect the writing of it to have such a profound emotional and physical impact.

In the period that followed the more intense of these episodes I also found it difficult to go back to working on the novel, even though I was (and continue to be) committed to completing the work. Christos Tsiolkas said of writing *Dead Europe*:

...[it] was a very difficult novel to write. It took time for it to find its form; it also took me, in the writing of it, into dark and fearful places. As a writer you take on aspects of your characters and if you are not careful the world you are creating begins to blend with the world you actually inhabit. That's not only a problem for yourself, but more importantly, for the people around you. (Tsiolkas 2008)

Like Tsiolkas I found my writing world seeping into my 'real' world. The anxiety did not stop when I closed the file, the sense of despair did not go away when I put the notebook in the drawer, the guilt did not dissipate when I moved on to other activities. These emotions followed me as I left the study and

interacted with my friends and family, with my students and co-workers. At times they were impossible to shake.

The writer and academic Anna Gibbs in her discussion of ‘contagious feelings’ writes:

Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear – in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion. (Gibbs 2001)

Gibbs is focused on the politician Pauline Hanson and television, and the way that the media can activate the affect of particular feelings, but this notion of ‘contagious feelings’ is one that is of interest to me as a writer too.

In this article my aim is to contribute to the understanding of the creative writing process by using my own experience of writing *The Fallen* to explore the emotional and psychological impact of writing ‘trauma fiction’, i.e. fiction that is centered around traumatic events and experiences (this might include collective historical experiences such as wars or slavery or individual experiences that impact on one person or a small group). Further to this I also intend to look at strategies that writers might use to manage this impact, which can be as Marguerite MacRobert argues an ‘emotional roller coaster’ (MacRobert 2012). My interest stems from a desire to understand the nature of creativity and the creative writing process both at a personal level and as a lecturer working with undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing students.

My previous novel, *Swimming* (2009), is partly autobiographical and though the main character Kate is not me, the experience of infertility, of the miscarriages and the associated grief were based on my experiences and writing it was often emotional and emotionally taxing. But I had expected these emotional responses to writing *Swimming* as part of the process of reworking a difficult and often traumatic experience into fiction; I was reliving the grief as I was writing. I was turning pain into ‘art’. The therapeutic benefits of writing about one’s own traumatic experience have been advocated by psychologists, counselors and writers (D’Mello & Mills 2013). The idea that writing the story of one’s traumatic experience can be healing has support across a number of disciplines including psychology and art therapy. As with the use of visual arts and performance in therapy, writing’s potential to lead to healing is based at least partly on the belief that creativity itself is therapeutic. In addition, there is growing evidence that telling one’s story and having that story be heard by others is a necessary part of the healing process (Esterling et al 1999; Pennebaker & Seagal 1999) and that it

can facilitate the purging of unwanted thoughts (catharsis), can leverage the stress relieving effects of self disclosure, can help individuals make sense about emotionally troubling events (sense-making), can help individuals manage their emotions more effectively (i.e., less rumination)... (D’Mello & Mills 2013: 1)

Though my intention in writing *Swimming* was not therapeutic, there were certainly benefits at a personal level from going through the difficult process of turning that experience into fiction. Tanya Lee Allport in her PhD thesis on women writing about trauma argues that when a writer is writing fiction that is not based on their experience even though the same therapeutic benefits cannot

be assumed there is likely to be an impact on the writer (Allport 2009: 210).

Allport's interest, along with those of other literary critics who write about trauma fiction (Vickroy 2002; Whitehead 2004) is in the way that trauma is conceptualised and reflected in contemporary fiction and the literary techniques that writers use to 'narrate the unnarratable' (Whitehead 2004: 4).

In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* Laurie Vickroy defines trauma as 'events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption' (Vickroy 2002: ix). Trauma fiction, for Vickroy, is a 'literary simulacrum of oral narrative' that seeks to create a truth effect, a feeling of lived experience (xii), and to create empathy among readers for the victims (xi).

For Vickroy writers of trauma fiction – at least those writers whose works she explores – are going beyond the presentation of traumatic events or trauma from a distance, as a subject or as related to by characters. They do this by incorporating: '...the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works' (Vickroy 2002: xiv) in order to 'make the readers experience emotional intimacy and immediacy, individual voices and memories, and the sensory responses of the characters' (xvi).

Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* argue that art including literature adds new varieties to the world by creating 'blocs of present sensation'. They argue that art through the senses gets hold of the world in a nonconceptual or 'sensational' way, sensation being a configuration of affects and percepts:

The writer uses words, but by creating a syntax that makes them pass into sensation that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing: this is the style, the "tone", the language of sensations... The writer twists language, makes it vibrate, seizes hold of it, and rends it in order to wrest the percept from perceptions, the affect from affections, the sensation from opinion... (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 176)

For Deleuze and Guattari the power of art is in adding these new monuments, these new varieties into the world that make the reader see what was not visible beforehand. To create these new monuments, the artist (in this case the writer) cannot stand at a distance – observing, watching – they have to become part of the person, thing, and event that they are creating. This process of identification with the characters and their experiences is a crucial part of the writing process. The writer, or at least this writer, must 'walk in the characters' shoes' and, the writer must do this repeatedly, in order to render their experience in the text in a way that connects with the reader.

While the reader might spend several weeks or even a month reading a novel, the writer will spend years with the work. This process requires living through the writing of the trauma over and over again. It requires knowledge of the events and the circumstances but more importantly of the emotional and psychological impact of those events on the character – and at all levels – emotionally, psychologically and physically.

While I write to find out what I am thinking, my motivation to shape the writing into a novel comes from my belief that by eliciting empathetic responses fiction has the potential to give the reader a greater understanding of other people and that this understanding might lead to positive actions, attitudinal and behavioural changes in the real world. That fiction can evoke empathy is supported not only by writers but by many others including 'educators to politicians and philosophers' (Juercic 2011: 10):

“We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see the world through their eyes. And the great power of books is the capacity to take you out of yourself and put you somewhere else.” (President Obama cited in Juercic 2011: 13)

Recent research in neuroscience has identified ‘mirror neurons’ in the brain – these neurons are activated not only when we experience emotions ourselves but when we watch them being experienced by others (Jurecic 2011: 10). This discovery has increased our understanding of the cognitive ‘mechanisms underlying empathy’ (Keen 2006: 207) and explains, at least partly, why representations in television, film, visual art and literature elicit empathy in onlookers and audiences (Keen 2006: 207).

In the introductory chapter of the edited collection *Empathy and Its Development*, Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer define empathy to involve

sharing the perceived emotion of another – “feeling with” another ... empathy as an emotional response that stems from another’s emotional state or condition and that is congruent with the other’s emotional state or situation. (Eisenberg & Strayer 1987: 5)

The title of this paper, *Walking in your shoes*, a common enough saying, arises from this definition of empathy – ‘I feel what you feel’ (Keen 2006: 209).

There are also those who argue that there is no evidence that empathy changes behaviour (Jueric 2011) and that empathy may actually be dangerous especially when it depends on notions of ‘universal human emotions’ or imposes one’s ‘own values on cultures and people that it scarcely knows’ or ‘short-circuits the impulse to act compassionately or to respond with political engagement’ (Keen 2006: 223). Like Keen and others I welcome the more recent scholarship that interrogates and problematises our understandings of empathy, but it is not my purpose in this article to explore the ways readers are changed or not changed by their emotional responses to fiction (which will vary from reader to reader), whether that emotion is empathy or sympathy (or for that matter any number of other emotions), but rather to explore the impact of the process of writing fiction about traumatic events or experiences on the writer.

Of course, we know the worlds we are creating are fictional, just as readers know the worlds they are entering are fictional. However, in my experience, while I write the imaginary *becomes* real. Cain Todd, an English philosopher interested in what he calls the ‘knowledge problem’, i.e. why readers have ‘genuine emotional responses [to fiction] and some of their associated action tendencies’ (Todd 2012: 450-451), concludes that

the more we are absorbed in the fiction and the less attentive we are to the fictionality of the content, the more attributive our emotions will seem to be, the more real the content will appear to be in our phenomenological awareness, and hence the more intense (*ceteris paribus*) our emotional reactions will be. (Todd 2012: 465)

This is the paradox within which I write: aware of the work’s fictionality, of the process of making and shaping and constructing, but at the same time having a sense that this world and its characters exist, are real, and my work is to bring them and their world to the page.

Suzanne Keen argues that it is important to study writers as well as readers in order to develop a theory of narrative empathy. In her overview of research in this area she argues that for many writers ‘the creative process [is experienced] as akin to involuntarily empathizing with a person out there, separate from themselves’ (Keen 2006: 221). Keen cites research undertaken in 2002 by Marjorie Taylor that found ‘fiction writers as a group scored higher than the general population on empathy’ (221). Keen warns though that it is impossible to know if this is a result of some innate quality or ‘*the activity of fiction writing [which] may cultivate novelists’ role-taking skills and make them more habitually empathetic*’ (Keen 2006: 221, italics in original) [2].

The writers that are the focus of Vickroy’s study of trauma fiction – Marguerite Duras, Toni Morrison, Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Dorothy Allison, Larry Heinemann and Pat Barker – are writers who are committed to making visible what was not visible beforehand in a way that can elicit ‘readers’ empathy and ... their capacity to contemplate complex human dilemmas’ (Vickroy 2002: 224). According to Vickroy these writers create prose that immerses the reader ‘in the bodily lives of the characters’, that has ‘visceral qualities’, because this kind of prose ‘gives readers a sense of the violations experienced by individuals as larger forces intrude on them’ (223). To write the body of the traumatized character, its visceral qualities, the writer must *know* it.

While my novel does not deal with the same kinds of historical traumatic events that Vickroy’s writers have tackled, many of these writers and their works have and continue to be my inspiration. I have spent hours with my character Jo as she grieves for her best friend and struggles with the guilt of being responsible for her death, as she struggles with the impossibility of living and contemplates suicide. As I lie awake at night thinking about her, I am anxious for her, for her mother, for the family of the dead girl. I have her dreams. I relive over and over again – with her – the moments before the accident. I see the images she sees of her friend lying dead on the road. I taste the bile rising in her throat. I feel the panic that traps her inside her room for days on end. And the rage that is followed by shame and disgust. I tap into my history, my past, my griefs and guilts, bringing ““to mind everything associated with the place and the moment”” (Lefer cited in MacRobert 2012: 253) so that my personal experience can assist the process of imagining myself in my character’s shoes. This is not unusual; many writers use this process (Mar et al 2011: 830; Freiman 2009).

Marcelle Freiman (2009), Charlotte Doyle (2010), Marguerite MacRobert (2010) and Michael Richardson (2013) have written about the embodied and emotional consequences of writing trauma. Richardson comments on Freiman’s assertion that writers ‘respond *bodily* to words they write – through breath, tensing of muscles, shifts in facial expressions’ (Richardson 2013: 157) by giving examples of his own responses ‘...my shoulders slump inwards as I write shame, my heart races in periods of intensity...’ (157). Charlotte Doyle, a psychologist interviewing writers on the process of writing fiction, found that writers experienced ‘feeling as if they are their characters’ (Doyle 2010: 33), often taking on those characters’ emotions with very physical responses including ‘chills’ and crying (33-34).

My initial surprise at my reaction to writing this current novel may well be considered naive, as Richardson writes: ‘Perhaps writing is never without cost, its productive potential always containing the capacity to change the body that writes in new and dangerous ways’ (Richardson 2013: 161). There is no ‘perhaps’ for me, I do believe it is necessary for us as writers to experience the emotions we are giving our characters – physically and psychologically –

before we can create works that engender empathy in the readers. I cultivate this because this very process of identification allows me to write most powerfully. My desire to write includes a desire to venture into the unknown (unknown to me) and often these are dark places and spaces. This journey has its rewards – not only in terms of my ability to write other lives and other worlds but in gaining access to a greater understanding of humanity for myself.

As writers and creative writing teachers we know this. Almost all books on writing craft encourage the process of imagining the world through the eyes of our characters. Creative writing workshop exercises are teeming with characters who have dark secrets, anxieties and fears, who are grieving for family members, characters who have been betrayed or misunderstood. Exercises like the following, given to me in one of the first writing classes I ever went to (versions of it are everywhere but I am not sure of its origin): *Describe a building from the point of view of a man who lost his only son in the war. Don't mention death. Don't mention the war. Don't mention the son.*

If venturing into the dark side of our characters is part of the writing process – how do we deal with the consequences in our lives? How do we support the student writers we are teaching and supervising to be prepared to deal with the consequences? As a supervisor, with students writing about the impact of migration, about rape, about war, I am acutely aware that there will be for them as there are for me consequences of writing into dark and traumatic spaces and places. These emotions – especially if the writer is unprepared – can be ‘extremely frightening’, as Kate Grenville found when she was writing *Dark Places*, her novel written from the point of view of a rapist:

I felt as if I was entering many dark places, dark places in our world where incest really happens, dark places in our culture where misogyny runs like an invisible underground stream, dark places in myself to which I had to give voice and words.
(Grenville 2013)

Working on *The Fallen*, has taken me into dark places. None of my characters are monsters or evil in the same way as the main character of *Dark Places*, they are different kinds of dark places – full of grief and guilt and despair. There is much about the writing process, the fiction-making process that I love and it is a privilege to be able to spend time writing fiction, even when it leads me into dark and traumatic places, or maybe even because it does lead me into those places. However, there are consequences of this way of working and these consequences can impact on our lives – including our lives away from the writing desk. This is not unique to writing. In many professions there are aspects of the work that can have an impact beyond the workplace and working hours. But while in some professions these consequences have been identified and processes for dealing with them have been documented in policy and procedure documents (however adequate), for fiction writers they remain largely unacknowledged.

In a rare article on this topic, ‘Exploring an acting method to contain the potential madness is the creative writing process: Mental health and writing with emotion’, Marguerite MacRobert discusses the comments made by a number of South African writers she interviewed, as well her own experience, to look at ways that writers might manage the ‘roller coaster of the creative writing process’ (MacRobert 2012: 350). MacRobert was interested in exploring the ‘coping mechanisms’ that writers had ‘stumbled’ across in dealing with the emotional pressures of writing, mechanisms that helped them enter into what Margie Orford, one of the interviewees, called ‘the parallel space of writing’ so they could as another interviewee, John van de Ruit,

described it, ‘shed the skin’ at the end of the working day in order to return from solitary writer to social self (356).

These ‘coping mechanisms’ included: seeking therapy, taking breaks – both during a day of writing and between writing projects – meditation, and the use of methods inspired by Stanislavski’s ‘method acting’ training such as ‘cooling down’ at the end of writing sessions and mindfulness exercises that work to return the actor/the writer from the fictional to the real world. As an example, Margie Orford wrote the end of her book first

because the subject matter she writes about “is so violent and so bleak that [she needs] to know that [she is] writing towards a point of connection again at the end” and to “know how it will resolve emotionally”’. (MacRobert 2012: 357)

I made an attempt to write the ending of *The Fallen*, believing like Orford that if I knew where the book ended it might ease the anxiety I was feeling. For me this didn’t work. I found it impossible to imagine the ending until I had imagined and written the character’s journey – and anyway I knew that no happy ending was possible.

In my four years working on *The Fallen* I have learnt to manage the anxiety and related emotions. Part of the process of managing them – by that I mean, keeping them contained to the writing/desk/computer instead of allowing them to seep into other areas of my life – has come from learning to recognize them and distinguish their source. Being aware that the writing process has an impact on me – the writer but also the partner, friend, daughter – and learning to understand the nature of that impact and its manifestations – emotional, psychological and physical – has been an essential part of that process. A necessary first step. With that awareness, other strategies can be put into place. Walking or swimming at the end of a writing day, even if while I walk I continue to think about and ‘write’ the novel, the walking helps to take the sting out of the emotional intensity. Breaks also help – taking at least one day off on the weekend for example – or even just a few hours to have dinner with friends or see a movie.

Writer and academic Sue Joseph, in a paper on issues related to supervising life writing of trauma, advocates flagging ‘the dangers early on in the [supervisor] relationship’ and ‘topics and sessions with potentially disturbing content with classes’. She warns students before the class so that they can opt not to attend (Joseph 2011). This advice holds just as well for fiction writing that explores trauma and traumatic events. I believe an important strategy with all students but especially with postgraduate students is to discuss the potential impacts with them. It is crucial that we ensure that students are aware that their writing is likely to impact their lives – their bodies, their emotions and their moods and inevitably their relationships with the people around – so that they can learn to recognise these impacts and develop methods for dealing with them. Also essential for students, as it is for all of us, is to share these experiences with each other – we don’t do enough of that. When I was a Youth Worker in the 1980s in a working-class suburb of Melbourne with high levels of unemployment and homelessness, there were often days when I felt weighted down by the problems facing the people I was trying to help. We were encouraged to ‘debrief’, to talk through our experiences with each other and with more senior colleagues. Often we were assigned a specific person to talk to. I found this a very useful way of shedding the burden of the job before I went home. Over the last few years I have been running a monthly creative writing workshop for the postgraduate students, and while its focus is to

workshop creative work in progress, it has also become a supportive space in which students can share their writing experiences.

Above my desk I have the following quote from Isabelle Allende:

I feel that writing is an act of hope, a sort of communion with our fellow men [and women]. The writer of good will carries a lamp to illuminate the dark corners. Only that, nothing more – a tiny beam of light to show some hidden aspect of reality, to help decipher and understand it and thus to initiate, if possible, a change in the conscience of the readers... [She] knows that the lamp is very small and the shadows are immense. This makes [her] humble. (Allende 1989: 49)

I share this quote with my students because I believe that though we may not always be able to achieve that illumination, it is worth striving for. In this paper my aim has been to illuminate the process of writing, of creating fiction that has emotional impact on readers. In part here I am addressing Keith Oatley's question: 'By what sorcery does the writer enable the reader to understand unseen worlds and to experience emotions about what goes on in them, while perceiving mere traces of ink on the page?' (Oatley 1995: 54). It is by opening ourselves up: 'write your heart out' advises Joyce Carol Oates to young writers (Oates 2009: 24). This process is worthwhile and has its rewards and its privileges. It also has consequences and it is important that we are aware of them so that we can best prepare ourselves and our students to venture into those 'dark corners' with our small lamps.

Notes

[1] The Westgate Bridge spans the Yarra River in Melbourne. It is one of the main links between the western suburbs of Melbourne and the CBD. In 1970 during the construction of the bridge one of the spans collapsed and fell. Thirty-five workers were killed. It is one of Victoria's worst industrial accidents. return to text

[2] There are long standing associations between writers and artists and mental illness and many writers have written about their anxiety and depression – Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Amy Tan, John Cheever... Researchers have also noted that writers seem to 'have tendencies to be schizoid, depressive, hysterical or psychopathic...' (Piiro 2009: 12) and have higher rates 'of manic-depression' (13). The questions then arise along lines similar to Keen's question about writers and empathy: Are those with mental illness attracted to writing? Is that what makes them more creative, more interested in telling stories? Or is there something about writing itself that might create or trigger these conditions? Much has been written about writers and mental illness and these are not questions I want address here. For me it was clear that while I may have had sleepless nights in the past, been anxious or worried, usually these reactions were related to real life situations and events. It was the realization that the anxiety was caused by my identification with and empathy for my fictional characters that took me by surprise. return to text

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