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Artful life stories: Enriching creative writing practice through oral history

Abstract
This paper, written at the culmination of a practice-led PhD project in creative writing, describes how the author's engagement with oral history theory and practice enriched the design of the novel emerging from the thesis. The novel, based on oral history interviews and archival materials, blurs the boundaries between historically verifiable information and fiction. Many fiction writers draw on interviews and archival material, but not all of them feel so tied to this material that they disclose its influence on their work. However, authors such as Dave Eggers, Anna Funder, Terry Whitebeach and Padma Viswanathan explicitly identify their novels as based on extended oral histories. While these authors describe their process to some extent, there is a lack of deep theoretical discussion around the task of transforming oral histories into fiction. This paper extends this discussion by providing a practitioner's account of how two key concerns of the oral history project in Australia – a concern with subjectivity and making oral history interviews accessible to a wide audience – underpin the design of the novel. The author concludes that the unique qualities of fiction can explore subjective experience, but the authenticity demanded of novels based on verifiable data can be constraining, and should not be elevated above a concern for the satisfactions of the reader.
Keywords: fiction, oral history, practice-led research

Introduction

The idea of producing what Nigel Krauth describes as the 'academic novel' (Krauth 2008: 10) can be perplexing for creative writing students embarking on a practice-led PhD. Barbara Milech and Anne Schilo's confusion over the 'exit Jesus' (a mishearing of 'exegesis') (Milech & Schilo 2004) reflects my own during the early stages of my PhD, when asked to document theoretically what I was producing creatively. This paper, written at the culmination of my PhD project, describes how I developed a methodology for producing a work of historical fiction informed by oral history interviews, which fostered a dialogic relationship between the creative and critical elements of the project. I explore how my deep engagement with the practice, dilemmas and preoccupations of oral history served as the foundation for my novel, *Hidden Objects*.

Hidden Objects is a work of historical fiction, set in Brisbane and based on oral histories and archival material. It centres on Brisbane artist Evelyn, who feels she has been given an impossible task: a derelict old house is about to be demolished, and she must capture its history in a sculpture that will be built on the site. Evelyn struggles to design the sculpture, realising that she has no way

to discover who inhabited the house. She only has a single photograph. What follows is a series of discontinuous narratives, set in a different eras in Brisbane's history, leading the reader backwards through the house's past. Evelyn's character, and some of the protagonists in the stories, is based on oral history interviews I conducted. The novel is an experiment in a hybrid form and is accompanied by an appendix that identifies the historically accurate sources informing the fiction. Here I use the term 'hybrid form' to refer to texts that blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction (Beghtol 2001; Whiteman & Philips 2006). The novel was shortlisted in the 2012 Queensland Literary Awards, Unpublished Manuscript Category.

Writers Acknowledging Interviews

It is common practice for writers, whether they are working in nonfiction or fiction, to draw on interviews and archival material. Many writers do not disclose its influence on their work. However, there are a number of novelists, producing hybrid works based on interviews, who feel obligated to explicitly acknowledge, either on the cover or in a foreword or afterword, an interviewee's story as having a significant impact on the construction of their writing. At the same time, the work is labelled as fiction.

For example, Anna Funder, in her novel *All That I Am* (2011), takes the memoirs and oral history interviews of real people, political activists Ruth Blatt and Ernst Toller, and 'reconstructs' them as first-person narratives of characters (Kavenna 2011). Padma Viswanathan states that her debut novel *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008) is informed by the interviews she conducted with her grandmother about her own grandmother's life as a Brahmin widow. Dave Eggers claims that his novel *What is the What*: *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel* (2007b) is closely based on the actual experiences of a Sudanese Lost Boy, Valentino Deng. Terry Whitebeach interviewed her son, Mick Brown, about his experience living in a rural community in Tasmania and together they produced the novel *Bantam* (2002).

These works are linked by a fascination with the compelling nature of oral stories and a desire to acknowledge the close ties between the fiction and life history that informed it. All share an intention to re-present interviews in a way that retains some key qualities of the oral story, typically the subject's point of view, narrative and/or voice. The writers are concerned with producing historically authentic fiction with verifiable details. These writers capitalise on what David Shields describes as 'reality hunger'. Shields uses the term to categorise a new artistic movement where "'nonfiction' material is ordered, shaped and imagined as "fiction"' (Shields 2010: 14). According to Shields, books that tap into reality hunger:

> Restore the novelty to the novel, with its ambiguous straddling of verifiable and imaginary facts, and restore a sense of readerly danger – that tightrope walk between newspaper report and poetic vision. (Shields 2010: 14)

Funder, Viswanathan, Eggers and Whitebeach walk this tightrope, acknowledging the primacy of interviews and verifiable life histories in the creation of their texts, while at the same time relying on techniques of the craft of fiction to re-present the interview. They acknowledge that they have imagined and invented details, scenes, character/s and plot points.

This may become more common if the trend towards reality hunger continues to grow, as Shields speculates it will. It is therefore timely for fiction writers to

broaden the discussion around fictional means of re-presenting oral histories and to draw on methodologies from the oral history discipline to augment their own practice. While both Whitebeach, in her 2010 article 'Place and People: Stories by and of Unemployed Youth in a Small Island Community', and Eggers in 'It was Just Boys Walking' (2007) discuss their writing process, there seems to be no other serious methodological discussion around the task of fictionalising oral histories written by fiction writers engaged in this task.

In her article, Whitebeach explains why she turned to fiction as a means to tell her adolescent son's story. When Brown, her son, unemployed because of an injury and living in a rural town, attempted suicide for the second time, she began searching for strategies to stay in contact. She knew Brown's oral storytelling skills were powerful. Brown 'was and is an excellent raconteur,' Whitebeach states (2010: 49). However, his time in school left him lacking the confidence to write literature. Whitebeach decided to record his conversations and write about them. In order to protect Brown, who still lived in the area, in *Bantam* Whitebeach and Brown 'conceal the name and exact location of the town [where Brown lives], and made composite characters from real people' (49). Whitebeach uses the term 'transmuted' to describe her process of collecting, transcribing and transforming Brown's story into fiction. However, she does not unpack in any great detail how this process occurred. Instead, Whitebeach focuses on Brown's response to writing the text, and the healing and collaborative nature of the writing processes.

Similarly, Eggers, in his article published in *The Guardian*, justifies why he chose to tell Deng's story as a novel. Eggers states:

> After that first year of interviews and my first attempt to assemble the resulting narrative, we [Deng and Eggers] both realised that there were great limitations, in this case, to the oral history model. Valentino was six years old when he left his home and began his 800-mile journey to Ethiopia, and thus his memory of that time was very spotty. When we looked at what we had from our recording sessions, it was fascinating, but it did not transcend the many human rights reports and newspaper articles already available to the world. (Eggers 2007a: 2)

Eggers believed that the 'book needed to demonstrate, step by step, how the war unfolded, through the eyes of a tiny boy in a busy market town' (ibid). Eggers knew the work had to have universal appeal and it had to represent the stories of all lost boys, not just Deng's (2007a: 5).

Eggers' desire to 'bring Valentino's [Deng's] story to a general reader' (2007a: 5) using fictive techniques aligns with my own intentions. However, as I will discuss in more detail, this intention does not always sit comfortably with the hybrid quality of such texts. Eggers does not address the success of his narrative. Rather, his article focuses on his struggle to decide on a form for Deng's stories. Eggers knew 'he knew he had to disappear completely' (2007a: 6) from the account and have Deng narrate, but that an edited oral history added nothing to the market; *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* (2005), oral histories from several Sudanese lost boys, had already been published. Eggers believes fiction can provide the sensory detail and dialogue missing from Deng's early memories.

Eggers also calls for British and American governments to exert influence in Sudan; he draws on his personal experiences meeting Deng to highlight the injustice of the situation. Whitebeach and Eggers discussion has focused on

justifying fiction as an appropriate form to re-tell oral histories. It is timely to extend this discussion by producing a methodology for fictionalising oral histories.

Self-reflective practice

Graeme Sullivan states that 'effective practitioners have the capacity to bring implicit and tacit understandings to a problem at hand and that these interact with existing systems of knowledge to yield new insight' (Sullivan 2010: 67). My methodology relies on the stance that 'serendipity and intuition are valued as part of experimental inquiry' (Dean & Smith 2009: 48). I draw on what Philip McIntyre describes as 'practitioner based enquiry techniques of action' (McIntyre 2006: 4); in this paper, I turn to field notes in my reflective journal, including key theoretical concepts, notes on story concepts and characters, detailed feedback from my supervisory team, and experiences collecting and understanding the oral history interviews.

In the early stages of the PhD, looking for guidance in gathering interviews, I joined the Queensland branch of the Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA Qld). In 2011, I became president of the branch. As a result of reflective practice, I realised that oral history practice and theory enriched not only my interviewing technique, but how I understood the interviews and transformed them into fiction. I found that two key theoretical preoccupations in oral history in Australia – a deep interest in subjectivity and a desire to engage audiences – became fundamental to the design of my novel.

Subjectivity and engagement in oral history

Alistair Thomson argues that, since the OHAA was established in 1978, there have been four paradigm transformations in the discipline, the first being 'the post-war renaissance of memory as a source of people's history' (Thomson 2007: 50). This focus on ordinary people is reflected in Beth Robertson's statement that the most important use of oral history is to 'record the perspectives of disadvantaged people who traditionally have either been ignored or misrepresented in conventional historical records' (Robertson 2006: 3). Significantly, Robertson identifies social historian Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* (2000) as a seminal text for oral history practitioners. She quotes a lengthy section from *The Voice of the Past* in order to emphasise the aims of the Association:

> Oral history is a history built around people. It allows for heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of people…It makes for contact – and hence understanding – between social classes, and between generations… In short it makes for fuller human beings. (Robertson 2006: 5)

These statements highlight the oral history project's social history agenda. Oral history is viewed as an enriching practice that can produce more socially aware and, by implication, better human beings.

This emphasis on the ordinary voice led to what Thomson identifies as the second paradigm transformation: 'the development, from the late 1970s of the 'post-positivist' approaches to memory and subjectivity' (Thomson 2007: 50). Thomson observes how, as a result of new understandings arising from post-

positivism, 'oral historians turned criticism of the unreliability of oral history on their head by arguing that…oral history's strength was the subjectivity of memory,' because it 'provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience but also the relationship between past and present, between memory and personal identity and between individual and collective memory' (54).

Linked to this social history agenda is a desire to make the products of oral history projects widely accessible. Robert Grele observes that oral history practitioners have been hesitant to praise 'academic uses of oral history' because of 'the increasing abstract nature of the language used' and the fact that the 'high prices of academic publication posed a barrier to effective politics' (Grele 2006: 55). Thomson notes that 'two of the concerns that trouble oral historians are that the increasing theoretical sophistication is incomprehensible to, or ignored by, oral historians outside of the academy and that interviewees may be bewildered by the deconstruction of their memories' (Thomson 2007: 56). Thomson warns against a 'retreat into rarefied debate,' arguing that oral historians should produce texts 'informed by our relationship with the men and women who tell us their memories and by our efforts to engage in political debate and social change' (56). The oral history project is thus deeply concerned with producing research that is highly accessible and engaging. My exposure to these notions, and best practice methods for gathering oral histories, shaped my methodology, from gathering the interviews to writing the novel.

Transcription

After collecting the interviews, a process which I describe in more detail in 'Obsessions with Storytelling: Conducting Oral History Interviews for Creative Writing,' published in *Ejournalist* in 2011, I set about transcribing them. Guided by best practice, I used Express Scribe software to support the transcription process (Robertson 2010: 58). This software allowed me to play, stop, rewind and slow down the audio, using hot keys on the keyboard, as I typed the transcript. The physical act of transcribing allowed me to become familiar with the interviewee's sentence structures and speech habits as text, in the form they take in the fictional work.

For instance, when I transcribed interviews with a former Brisbane nurse, Barbara, who had lived on stations in the Northern Territory and New South Wales, I noticed several speech patterns, storytelling habits and indicators of attitude that formed the basis of the way I presented her fictive voice through the character of Judy. Barbara recounted stories that demonstrated the toughness and ingenuity of bush people. For instance, she described how her father convinced property owners to invest in refrigeration for station managers by arranging for them to visit the station in the middle of the boiling Northern Territory summer; her ability to hold alcohol better than the other nurses; and Matron 'Matey' Fitzgerald's recognition of her as a bush girl and therefore more capable. In the chapter based on Barbara's story, I have the fictional character of Judy recount some of these narratives.

Barbara's descriptions of the bush were vivid, but always specific, linked to physical objects and characterised by a sense of movement. For example, Barbara describes the 'great wide river that spread across the stone' behind their house in the Northern Territory and how her father was a couple of 'flooded, alligator-ridden creeks away' when her mother came down with malaria.

In the scene in Judy's story when I evoke the house that is about to be demolished, I use these habits of description, distinct from my own lyrical style to create a sense of strangeness about the place. In this section, I underline the sentence that is a direct quote from the interview with Barbara:

> They put the nurses in a kind of extension out the back, which ran along George Street. Our beds were much the same as the patients', single, made with that heavy cast iron, and a mattress about half the height of your hand lay on top. <u>At night, we'd come sneaking in through all sorts of backways. You never went a direct route to your room.</u> I got to know the building quite well, found all the pockets and hidey-holes, the places where the wall turned at such an angle that you couldn't be seen from the other rooms or down the hallways. I tiptoed past the men, asleep on their white sheets in their white pyjamas with the top tucked in. At such times I got the feeling that something was about to change. I had an impulse to yell out or to dance across the floorboards. Of course I never did.

Here, I use the same sense of physical description grounded in concrete objects, and create a sense of movement. I invent a small 'strange' moment, when Judy feels she would like to dance, which is almost out of character, because in all other aspects, Judy is practical. This implies there is some strange force in the house. Judy resists and asserts her own character.

The transcription process allowed me to understand what was 'in character' for Judy. As I was transcribing, I also noted Barbara's habit of rapidly moving through difficult events in her life. In one section, she describes her husband's injury in the war:

> But, it's the luckiest thing that ever happened to him because his leg went bad, an infection, and they couldn't clean it up. So there was he, and two other blokes, who were all on the DI, the 'dangerously ill' list, they were going to die. And they were sent this new stuff from England to try. And it was penicillin. In those days…they irrigated into the wound. But anyone that had it that way was most violently allergic to penicillin for the rest of their lives.

This rapid summarising seemed to indicate a pragmatic attitude to life, which was reflected in a number of abstract phrases, such as

> 'You just got on.'
> 'You just made do.'
> 'You got better. Or you died. There were two options.'

These attitudinal indicators revealed Barbara's, and, by extension, Judy's, response to difficulties and challenges. Her pragmatic, 'no fuss, no worries' attitude seemed to directly shape the way Barbara not only recounted life events, but remembered them. In the interview, Barbara said: 'I mean, I didn't take much interest. I took things as they came and didn't worry about it, so it's hard to remember a lot of things now.'

This evidence of Barbara's interpretation of the past and how her attitudes shaped the way she remembered life events, which I gleaned through transcription, became the foundation of the fictive character Judy, directly shaping her first person voice.

Informed imagination

Historical fiction writer Geraldine Brooks uses the term 'informed imagination' to describe her engagement with research (Brooks 2012). I adopted this notion to describe the aspect of my methodology in which I retain specific qualities of the interviews and archival material while at the same time evoking the past and filling in the gaps using fictive techniques and imagination. Best practice in oral history encourages the researcher to contextualise the interview through reading around the topic (Robertson 2010: 8) and to deeply analyse the interview (Yow 1997: 58). I used these methods to construct a rich fictive voice.

Once I transcribed the interviews, I re-read the transcripts several times. I put them aside when I sat down to write, noticing what events and scenes stayed with me after I had finished reading. For example, I remembered clearly Barbara describing how she and the 'Abo kids' played together:

> We'd be round at the cubby houses, digging drains and ditches, mud pies, climbing up trees and chasing possums. Not anything that city kids did. We didn't know about games like hopscotch or – never heard of them.

This description is vivid with the nostalgia of childhood games and emblematic of Barbara's habit of distinguishing bush people from city people, which I'd identified earlier in transcription. Unlike the earlier sections, there is a hint of conflict underlying this scene, a sense of isolation from the mainstream. Barbara develops this theme later in the interview when she describes how she was almost expelled from boarding school for fighting with other children and smoking used cigarette butts underneath the auditorium stage, habits developed in the Northern Territory.

Barbara's description of playing with the Aboriginal children became one of the key scenes in the creative work, shown as a flashback. In Judy's story, she and Molly dig ditches in the creek – which Barbara evokes vividly in the transcript – when Judy sees the station manager, John Aubrey, leave the Blacks' Camp:

> Molly and I once dug a ditch all the way from the crossing to the camps. We were getting the water to flow down it, and blocking it up again with rocks from the river…I was ahead of Molly, breaking through the dirt and watching the water seep away. You had to be quick or the water soaked through and you were left with mud. Molly was behind me, widening the channel, patting down the edges so they weren't washed away. I looked up, saw the Blacks' camp and I stopped digging.
> I saw Mr. Aubrey coming out of one of the humpies.
> I called out to him: 'Mr. Aubrey!'
> Molly ran up behind me and put her hand over my mouth. It was covered in dirt, all wet and slimy like cold porridge.
> And Molly in my ear saying, 'Shhhh.'
> I elbowed Molly's arm, pulling her hand away from my face…I don't know why I remember this at all, except I have this very vivid image of myself standing in front of the mirror with a great muddy handprint across my face.

I relied on the process of informed imagination to construct this scene. I capture the same sense of nostalgia and underlying conflict I identify in the extract from Barbara's interview. I focus on Judy's enjoyment of playing in the

dirt with Molly, using details from other parts of the interview, such as the rocky creek bed. I contextualise Barbara's interview, researching the gaps in her story. While Barbara mentioned the 'lubras' (Indigenous women in domestic service) and 'Abos' working on the station, she didn't mention anything about their working conditions. I read about conditions in the Blacks' Camp in Ronald and Catherine Berndt's *End of an Era: Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory* (1987) and use details from this text to enrich the fictional scene and shape the narrative. I juxtapose the blacks' camps and the sexual implications of John Aubrey's presence with the innocence of the girls' game. I build on this tension using an image suggested by the original interview: the muddy handprint, which implies some momentary imprint of the exploitation of the Indigenous people on the station, quickly washed off.

In this scene, as in the interview extract, the tension is implicit rather than explicit; the real purpose of Aubrey's visit is left ambiguous. As in an oral history interview, there is an interaction between the remembered self, the self who acts in the past and is evoked in the present day, and the remembering self, the self who narrates in the interview. Judy's remembered self did not understand the implications at the time, while her recollecting self does not want to acknowledge them. At the end of the story, she expresses concern for Molly, but doesn't want to deeply reflect on the topic:

> When I came back, on those first lot of Christmas holidays,
> Molly was gone. John Aubrey said he didn't know where. But
> you hear these terrible stories, you know? I was never really
> one for taking much note of things. They just came and went. It
> was only just now I remembered her name.

In this scene, the reader can at once understand the implied abuse of Molly, while still empathising with Judy.

Part of my process of informed imagination was to rely on details that were not the focus of the main narrative – Judy's time nursing in the old house, which is to be demolished in the frame narrative – to suggest fictive scenes. For example, I wanted to create a scene that showed the occasionally fraught relations between Barbara and her mother-in-law. Barbara had said that her mother-in-law had a habit of running her fingers along the shelves checking for dust, and 'sticking her beak into every bloody thing'. However, Barbara hadn't given any other concrete examples. I felt the checking for dust story was too clichéd for my purposes and made the tensions seem petty, even though they had a significant effect on the way Barbara behaved and chose to raise her children:

> I always felt that what with…[my mother-in-law] sticking her
> beak into every bloody thing round the place I knew I wasn't
> going to do it to my kids. And I think they might have thought
> that sometimes I completely ignored them.

I was searching for some convincing moment I could use to show this tension. Then I read a section of transcript where Barbara was recalling her first memories:

> I can remember Aunt Aggie coming to stay, Dad's oldest sister.
> She was a wonderful cook and I can remember her sitting in the
> kitchen and the sweat pouring off her, beating like hell, making
> a sponge cake and letting me dip my fingers in.

This struck me as a rich detail that evoked the time, the domestic space of Barbara's childhood, and the joy of the child eating batter. I transform this

detail into a scene in the novel, with Judy's mother-in-law:

> Once I remember – after Fred and I were married – trying to help her [Fred's mother-in-law] by making sponge cake for dessert. There was a young cousin or something running around and while I was beating the mixture, I let her dip her finger in. Mrs Devine rushed over and snatched the bowl from my hands and poured all the mixture down the sink.

Here, I take the detail and emotion of the recollection and contrast it with Fred's mother's extreme action to demonstrate both the pettiness Judy perceives – and remembers in vivid detail – and Judy's powerlessness in the situation.

Informed imagination thus involves analysing the findings of transcriptions, such as specific storytelling habits and attitudinal indicators, in order to develop character and voice, and augmenting the oral history interview with research. In the case of Barbara, the research shows a new point of view, that of the Indigenous station workers, which I used to create implicit tension in scenes. Like Eggers, I fill in the gaps of memory and create scenes often suggested by details and stories present in the transcript. My fiction is at once constrained and augmented by oral history interviews and research.

Fiction, subjectivity and marginal characters

Having conducted and transcribed interviews, guided by oral history methodology, and informed imagination, I needed to decide what kind of work I was actually writing, and its purpose. In some cases, I made these decisions instinctively. It wasn't until I reflected on my own process in the context of oral history practice that I realised my work was deeply concerned with stories about subjective experience and unheard points of view from Brisbane's history.

More than any other form, fiction has the capacity to represent a character's interior. Dorrit Cohn argues that the difference between fiction and biography – and other traditional representations of oral history interviews – is that 'a character can be known to the narrator in fiction in a manner no real person can be known to a real speaker' (Cohn 2000: 117). Literature 'can provide direct access to other people's minds and hearts' and 'in so doing yields essential data, which we use in order to sharpen the accuracy and to increase the depth of our inferential knowledge about the interior lives of real-life persons' (Gregory 1998: 29). A fiction writer's imaginative attempt to depict the interior of their characters, particularly if they are based on evidence of subjective interpretation apparent in oral history interviews, may provide a deeper understanding of, and comment on, the processes of remembering, interpretation and storytelling present in an oral history interview, and deepen readers' empathy with others.

This closely aligns with the oral history project's social history mandate. For example, Judy reflects on past events from a distance. The remembered self, young Judy, is mostly concerned with having a good time, has rigid notions about what constitutes heroism, and does little self-reflection. The remembering self is an older woman looking back on her past. The 'speaking' Judy is more reflective, but not disruptive. She is content to leave the gaps in the story untouched and often forgets things that are unpleasant or that she evaluates as not useful. In the ironic gap between 'who sees' and 'who speaks,' the reader is forced to read between the lines of the story, to recognise that acts

of forgetting and silence have motives, and that certain privileges might come at a cost. Despite being an unreliable narrator, Judy still invites empathy. I present her as charismatic, tough and with a powerful sense of humour. The reader may grudgingly admire her cohesive sense of self and firm ideas, even if they find these qualities abrasive. I invite readers to experience similar mixed feelings to the ones I experienced while interviewing Barbara.

Engaging readers

I had always hoped that my work would serve to encourage readers to engage with oral histories. However, in the process of writing, I found that works of fiction claiming to be based on true stories, particularly oral histories, are subject to an unresolved tension. They must include an inferred readers' desire for authenticity, specific details of place, and the pleasures of imaginative storytelling. Here, I use the term 'inferred reader' to refer to the reader I imagined would take an interest in my novel. Michael Crotty describes a process of meaning-making whereby 'meaning emerges through the mind's interaction with objects' (Crotty 1998: 48). Crotty notes that imagination and creativity operate in a precise interplay with an object (ibid). The notion of the 'inferred reader' is therefore based on my re-reading and reflection on the novel, my supervisors' feedback on the work, and the critical responses to similar kinds of writing. I use this evidence to precisely imagine, as Crotty has it, the possible responses to the novel.

Positioning the work: Hybrid fiction

My first concern was how to position the work. I chose to label my novel as 'fiction informed by oral history interviews.' Like other fiction writers re-presenting interviews, particularly Eggers, I use textual markers, such as the subtitle, to indicate the work's status. The advertising campaign to promote Anna Funder's *All That I Am* demonstrates that publishers are increasingly using the tag line 'based on a true story' as a way to sell fiction of this kind (Penguin 2011). As similar texts emerge, readers are likely to take this claim with the same scepticism, and awareness of the process of invention, that many viewers apply to movies claiming to be based on a true story.

When a text positions itself in this way, it opens itself up to a new line of criticism: the need for the work to be at once verifiable and accurate, as well as an engaging story. As Kavenna points out in her review of *All That I Am*:

> The claims of authenticity, of 'reconstruction,' are risky and complicating, as Funder seems to acknowledge as she urgently seeks to define the enterprise, each attempt raising further questions. Such as: if a novelist aims at drawing 'skin and feathers' over the 'dinosaur bones' of her sources, then what is the 'beast' she is allowing us to 'fully see'? A reconstruction of the past, to be judged on how realistic or convincing it is? Or an impossible fantasy, to be judged solely on the extent to which it entertains the reader? (Kavenna 2011)

I would argue that Kavenna makes the point too extremely in claiming that a novel must either be a reconstruction of the past or an impossible fantasy. Rather, novels can offer space to explore the interviewee's subjective experience. Krauth states succinctly, 'good novels are always investigative, always educational, for the writer as well as the reader' (Krauth 2008: 13).

However, the point remains that such novels need to fulfil the twin functions of engagement and authenticity in order to satisfy the inferred reader. For example, SA Jones, when describing *All That I Am*, states 'curiosity about which parts of the story were 'bones,' and which, 'feathers,' distracted me from the compelling, rich narrative' (Jones 2011).

This criticism of Funder's work made me aware my own inferred readership. I supposed that my readership would be similar to those who enjoyed Rosamond Siemon's *The Mayne Inheritance* (1997). *The Mayne Inheritance* won the Brisbane City Council's 'One Book One Brisbane' competition in 2003 and was re-published in 2007 by the University of Queensland Press. Siemon's novel is described as 'literary nonfiction' (Yench 2003), and speculates that a wealthy and influential Brisbane figure, Patrick Mayne, committed murder, stealing from his victim the capital to start a business.

One of the satisfactions for the inferred reader of *The Mayne Inheritance* is that they are told an unknown and controversial story about a prominent Brisbane family whose name has long been associated with scandal and rumours. I hope to tap into this satisfaction by revealing untold stories about Brisbane, or known stories from a new point of view. As in *The Mayne Inheritance*, the hidden, secretive qualities of the stories give the reader the same satisfaction as gossiping over the back fence.

This aligns with the social history agenda of the oral history project. The novel's authenticity – it's relationship to verifiable sources – underpins the telling of the past through subjective experience and its special relationship with Brisbane landmarks. Kavenna identifies this as one of the tensions in producing fiction based on a true story. Kavenna, speaking of *All That I Am*, states that she 'doesn't know to what extent [Funder] has quoted the originals [interviews and other sources] and to what extent she has rewritten them. It doesn't matter if one is assessing her book as a novel' (Kavenna 2011). For me as a fiction writer, this raises the question: is it possible to give my inferred readers the satisfaction of discovering stories about Brisbane landmarks, if this special quality is reliant on verifiability? How could I use the specific qualities of fiction and demonstrate the verifiability of my sources?

As I was writing a draft of the novel, this tension became more apparent. I found myself enthused by the stories I was uncovering in the research. In one chapter, for example, I included an entire scene about Arthur Conan Doyle's stay at the Bellevue Hotel, based on my reading of his book, *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (1921), which was only very vaguely related to the main narrative about a young woman attending Horace Leaf's lectures. My supervisor picked this up almost immediately, asking me what the function of the scene was in the story. I couldn't answer him. Yet, because of the reasons outlined above, I knew this detail would give satisfaction to my readers. How could I include these historically verifiable details in my story without disrupting the reader?

Appendix

One solution I experiment with in the novel is to do what Kavenna's comment implies and identify the original sources and to what extent they have been re-written. *Hidden Objects* is accompanied by an appendix that identifies the primary sources, the page number of the novel in which they appear as fictionalised accounts, and the extent to which they have been fictionalised. In this way, the novel relies on the distinct qualities of fiction, such as its capacity

to explore the interior of character and, at the same time, engage the inferred readership with site-specific, verifiable details of Brisbane.

Reflecting on my decisions about the appendix, and other aesthetic choices in the novel, I come to a sense of the limitations of the fictive form and the impossibility of resolving the tensions between authenticity and fiction. In the first draft of the novel, I positioned the appendix as an extra-textual aspect of the novel, sitting outside the fictive narrative and commenting on what aspects of the story was fictionalised and which were not. However, my supervisors believed that this made the appendix redundant at best and self-indulgent at worst. The fiction could implicitly contain evidence of my research and, by implication, give the same satisfactions as *The Mayne Inheritance.* To comment on it was an unnecessary intrusion.

To resolve this tension, the appendix either needed to be removed or included as part of the fictive narrative. To this end, I present the appendix as the fictional character Evelyn's notes. The references to real books, articles and websites and the shift from description of scenes to a more reflective, abstract tone indicates the verifiability of this data.

I began this project in the belief that fiction could offer a liberating solution to my desire to tell Brisbane history and fill in the gaps. However, increasingly, I found that my fiction was suffering from a proliferation of detail. I wanted to tell too many stories. While these stories fulfilled the satisfaction of telling little known aspects of Brisbane's history, they were unnecessary to the narrative. They weighed down the story, slowing the pace and confusing the reader. In addition, they had no function: they did not advance the narrative, reveal character or develop theme.

Thus, fiction was not the complete solution I had imagined it to be. There were conventions that could not be flouted without losing the engaging quality of the story, causing confusion about the status of the text, or worse, completely dissolving its meaning. I understood in a practical sense what I had theoretically: that fiction was a highly artificial means of configuring reality and the very qualities that I had advanced also limited the scope of my practice.

The need for a cohesive narrative clashed with my desire to show multiple points of view. My stories lacked an overall framework. I wanted readers to engage with them all, not pick and choose. As a result, I chose to link the stories with a frame narrative. The form of this narrative was important. It had to encourage readers to keep reading. AS Byatt describes how she relied on the generic conventions of the detective story while writing *Possession* (1990) to give her readers pleasure. Byatt states, 'the pleasure in fiction is narrative discovery' (Byatt 1995). I too use a mystery story to structure Evelyn's frame narrative. The reader is invited to continue reading in anticipation of narrative discovery, of hearing the unknown stories of the house.

But truly knowing the history of the house and, for Evelyn, producing a sculpture of it, is impossible. Evelyn comes unstuck trying to choose a suitable shape for her sculpture, given the requirements of the task the council has set for her: to replace the house with her artwork. In the novel, Evelyn offers some resolution to this tension: it is not the discovery that is important, but the process of uncovering; it is the anticipation of discovery that gives pleasure and the possibilities of revised understandings.

Conclusions: An 'unruly story'

The conclusions of the novel ultimately represent my own. I intend this work to be considered not as a solution, but as an experiment. The qualities of fiction have unique sympathies with certain mandates of the oral history project. The fictive form thus can be considered a tool kit for writers and researchers interested in exploring subjectivity in oral history interviews and with re-presenting oral histories in an accessible, engaging manner, albeit with limitations and uncertainties. In this paper, and in the novel, I respond to these mandates through practice and self-reflection. This response does not signify a conclusion but contribution to the discussion around fiction's capacity to represent the past.

In a broader context, the tensions inherent in producing such a work may be reflected in debates in the publishing industry as more hybrid texts emerge. Readers' reality hunger – a hunger for a particular kind of mediated reality, a reality aware of its own constructedness and of the slipperiness of the truth claims of subjective experience – may inflect the form. The tensions between authenticity and telling an engaging narrative using fictional techniques may never be resolved. However, my experience demonstrates that the qualities of effective fictive storytelling should be elevated above a desire to emphasise the verifiability of data through the proliferation of unnecessary details.

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