

## University of the Sunshine Coast

### Greg Nash

#### *The creative writing kaleidoscope*

##### *Abstract*

*Having completed my Doctorate of Creative Arts, I find myself not only wanting to defend the exegetical component of the degree, but applaud it for the way it enhanced my own knowledge, as it should, and enriched my creative outcome, Assimilating Eden. This paper builds on the methodology chapter of my exegesis for my Doctorate of Creative Arts and introduces the 'Creative Writing Kaleidoscope': a decision-making methodology for choosing exegetical research paths and better linking the creative and exegetical components of research higher degrees. For the avid creative writer, the exegesis can be a source of anxiety (Bourke & Neilson 2004: 1), but is a necessity when demonstrating scholarship with creative higher degrees. I believe the root of this anxiety lies in the lack of theoretical framework currently available to creative writing higher degree by research students that links exegesis with creative outcome, and by theoretical framework, I mean methodology. Establishing clear academic methodological practices will situate creative writing better within the academy and promote greater symmetry within the discipline and higher degrees across different institutions. Keywords: creative writing, methodology, theoretical framework, exegesis, creative writing kaleidoscope*

##### **Introduction**

Research demonstrates scholarship which, in the creative writing higher degree, is mainly located within the exegetical constituent. This is not to say that the creative outcome of a higher degree, or elements of it, is not classified as research, but that the components of the exegesis better frame it to sit within the research practices of the university system. As Barrett (2004) suggests 'the exegesis is a means of articulating a more profound rationale for institutional recognition and support of creative arts research'. The components of the exegesis and how they fit into the university system can be better understood when observing Fletcher and Mann's (2004) definitions of the exegesis. They say:

The role of the exegesis is to present the research framework: the key questions, the theories, the disciplinary and wider contexts, of the project. These things are not necessarily evident – to the examiner or viewer – in the creative work itself. The exegesis here serves to flesh these out, to make them explicit. The exegesis, which 'elaborates, elucidates and contextualises' the resulting body of creative work, may be *more or less* theoretical and analytical, depending on the nature of the research question and the researcher. (Fletcher & Mann 2004)

Thanks to the many threads, such as those in *TEXT*, discussing the exegesis, it is becoming easier to define, but defining the exegesis and writing it are different things. As Krauth (2002) states '[s]tudents are generally mystified by, or fearful of, the exegesis'. Further, Brien's 2004 survey of higher degree by research students also demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for the exegesis. She found that 100 per cent of students surveyed finished their creative outcome first and that 30 per cent said the exegesis was 'a waste of time' (Brien 2004). More concerning were some of the comments received in the survey such as: 'I was very confused about the role of the exegesis as were, it seemed, my supervisors'. This suggests that the research higher degree in creative arts is still going through a developmental phase, but also that a methodology, which can be employed across the discipline, would give more direction and symmetry to higher degree students. The idea here is not to put strictures on the creative writing higher degree or creative outcome, but to offer a framework to higher degree students that might help them to recognise and establish the links between the exegesis and creative outcome in the hope of enriching both.

Before a methodology for creative writing can be developed, there first needs to be a clear understanding of what is meant by 'methodology'. Kaplan suggests methodology 'is used both for a certain discipline and for its subject-matter. I mean by *methodology* [original emphasis] the study—the description, the explanation, and the justification—of methods, and not the methods themselves' (Kaplan 1964: 18). Further to this DeFleur says methodology 'requires that the steps used in selecting and studying a problem be described and the justifications for using particular approaches be explained' (DeFleur 1997: 212). The problem with developing a methodology in creative writing is that every creative outcome is likely to be different to any that came before. Therefore, like all other academic disciplines, we have to develop a theoretical framework by identifying and isolating commonalities that all researchers in the discipline can utilise. Through the creative writing experiences in my undergraduate and postgraduate study I believe methodology in the discipline requires two key elements:

1. Content: meaning the themes and discourses the author wishes to progress to their readers, and
2. Format and structure: meaning point of view and perspective, setting, plot structure, voice, character and conflict.

The issue here is that format and structure has its limitations and can therefore be contained within a relatively straight forward theoretical framework, but content on the other hand, is only limited by the author's imagination, and this is where the trouble begins. I would argue that every author writes with the purpose of progressing particular themes and discourses on to their readers with the intention of influencing their reality in some way. This is located in the subject matter of the novel and is the crux of postgraduate study in creative writing. It is also the difficult point in developing a standard methodology.

### **Why the need for methodology in creative writing?**

The first argument I put forward for the need of a methodology in creative writing is the inconsistency of approach to creative outcome and exegesis between higher degree by research students. This inconsistency does not just relate to format and structure of the exegesis, but also to the order in which the writing components are completed. Brien's survey into the research practices of creative writing higher degrees highlights the inconsistency between students. She states:

The overwhelming impression from this data is that most of these students planned, began and completed a significant amount of writing and redrafting of their creative project before beginning to work on their exegesis, and in many cases, before even considering their exegesis. (Brien 2004)

This contradicts my experience (which I am not claiming to be the correct way) where I viewed the research in the exegesis as integral to writing the creative outcome, and therefore completed 80 per cent of the exegesis before starting the creative outcome. This also mirrors Brien's approach where she says:

I found that I had, without consciously making a decision to, completed a first rough draft of my doctoral exegesis while finishing the research necessary for writing my creative project ... [t]his meant that not only had I engaged in a significant amount of the theoretical, critical and genre-based reading necessary for my exegesis while I was completing the biographical and historical research for the creative project ... but, in addition, I had notes, passages and even draft chapters written around the exegesis *before* I began to write my creative project. (Brien 2004)

I have no doubt after being awarded my doctorate that the themes and discourses expressed in my creative outcome were much richer for the foundation work I completed in the exegesis in advance of writing the creative outcome. In saying this, when I finally wrote the creative outcome, it led to me adjusting and adding elements to the exegesis to cater for directions the novel took that I did not pre-empt.

Although writing the exegesis first, or corresponding to the creative outcome, is not the general practice of many higher degree students, there is some logic to suggest this should be adopted. For example, if the content matter of the creative outcome contains cultural elements, the author should engage with cultural theory research before writing the creative outcome so as to inform themselves and enrich the creative outcome. As Melrose states:

Critical theory teaches writers how to think about and articulate that, thinkers such as Barthes, Bakhtin, Kristeva, Foucault, Derrida, Freud, Leavis, Lacan and so on are there to help them to understand it – and so when tutors are marking students' work, especially at postgraduate level, is it too much to expect a kind of critical commitment from those students? Perhaps it's the terminology and the use of the words 'critical theory' instead of 'thinking' that creates the problem. Yet, in universities we expect an ideological, philosophical and theoretical vigilance from even our newest undergraduate critics ... so why do we not expect our new writers to be equally engaged in critical process – especially at postgraduate level? (Melrose 2007: 114).

Learning about cultural theory after the fact (having written the creative outcome first) will only inform the author of what they should have written about in the first place. This means it would be best practice to have a deliberate link between the research in the exegesis and the creative outcome. This brings about question on whether the objective (exegesis) should inform the typically subjective (creative outcome) as was my experience, or whether the subjective should inform the objective in hindsight, or whether this process should be in a constant flux between objective and subjective to achieve the

optimal outcome. This comes back to Brien's suggestion that we 'could be promoting the exegesis as a task which is integral to, and worked alongside, the creative work, rather than one which is addressed, and begun, after the creative work is complete' (Brien 2004). The employment of a good methodological model at the start of a higher degree would demonstrate the links between the creative outcome and exegesis and vice versa, giving direction to the student, and just as importantly, revealing a clear approach that was taken to markers.

Further need for methodology in creative writing becomes evident when looking at where different universities place creative writing as a discipline within their own structure and how they approach the discipline in a higher degree. Many institutions still do not understand where creative writing students fit into postgraduate study because there is a limited theoretical framework for the discipline. As a result students may lack sufficient supervision, or worse, they may be forced into theoretical frameworks of other disciplines that in some cases do not cater for their learning needs. Krauth (2000) addressed this issue and latter posed the question: 'Where does this mongrel – Creative Writing – really sit?' when looking at Australian universities. The faculties or divisions he identified were:

- Several English Departments
- A School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities
- A School of Creative Communication and Cultural Studies
- A Faculty of Arts and Business
- A School of Media and Journalism
- A Department of Creative Media
- A School of Social and Behavioural Sciences
- A Faculty of Social Enquiry
- A Faculty of Creative Arts (Krauth 2000)

This can be further compounded when looking at exegetical approaches. Bourke and Neilson's (2004) research found that they could 'distinguish four types of discourse most frequently being used in exegetical practice: First Order Journal Practice, Second order Journal Practice, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies Theory' (Bourke and Neilson 2004). While Milech and Schilo (2004) outline Curtin University's 'best-practice models', being the Context, Commentary, and Research-Question models. The issue here is that creative writing likely fits in all, and any, of these divisions, faculties, discourses, or disciplines. It appears to sit on the fringes of any number of disciplines, and when doing a creative writing higher degree, these disciplines will usually be identified through the content of the creative outcome. Again, a methodology will help to identify these disciplines to receive adequate supervision and capitalise on theory that will enrich the creative outcome and exegesis.

Creative writing is multi-disciplinary and I would argue that doing a postgraduate degree in creative writing will not make any single individual an expert in creative writing. A researcher of the discipline can be an expert in narrative format and structure, but content leaves to many variables for every researcher of creative writing to fall under one umbrella. If I was to regard myself as an expert in relation to creative writing, I would suggest I am an expert in futuristic science fiction, and in the big picture of creative writing, this is a very specific area. If I was to say I was an expert in creative writing and someone asked me about the origins of romance, sure, I know the basics, but I would struggle to go into any great detail. My research findings led me to discover that futuristic science fiction is linked directly to history, mythology, colonisation, technology, and contemporary culture, politics, and society, just to name a few areas of study. These are the theoretical frameworks I employed to develop a methodology to my exegesis and this is what enhanced the themes

and discourses I intended to progress through my creative outcome. It could therefore be said that I took what Boulter (2007: 24) calls an eclectic research process. Eclecticism being ‘research that consciously and selectively adapts specific components from diverse explanatory frameworks originally developed in separate research traditions’ (Sil & Katzenstein 2005: 3). Using an eclectic approach works for creative writing, but it is still not a clear methodological model that gives direction to the research practices of the discipline.

### **The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope**

Although it can be complicated, there is a theoretical approach to deal with this problem that should give researchers in the discipline direction and, at the same time, enrich the themes and discourses of their creative outcome. Simply put, the researcher has to identify which other academic discipline/s the content of their creative outcome best fits. A strategy to identify possible disciplines is to look at the codes and conventions of the genre the researcher is writing in. What academic discipline/s best encompass the generic codes and conventions of the creative outcome and the desired themes and discourses wanting to be progressed by the author? This is something students of creative writing may find intimidating, but nonetheless, this deliberate linking between the creative outcome and exegesis will help the research practice of the discipline better sit within the university system. This will give the researcher the opportunity to have a theoretical framework from which to develop a strategy to achieve the desired outcome, rather than discussing how the creative outcome came about in retrospect (if the creative outcome is completed first). Currently, there does not seem to be a right or wrong approach, but a methodology will give higher degree students direction and this is where the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope comes into play.

The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope accepts that most postgraduate creative writing degrees require eclectic analysis and will not fit into a single disciplinary theoretical framework, but rather moves between, or at least borrows from a number of disciplines. For this reason the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope employs all discipline areas provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (*Australia and New Zealand Standard Research Classification 2008*: 12-134), to ensure that regardless of the content of any creative outcome, a methodology can be developed to give students a theoretical framework on which to map research practices.

I developed the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope while working on the methodology for my doctorate of creative arts. The goal here is that a researcher of creative writing, who has an idea of their desired creative outcome, can map a research path that will provide them with the best theoretical framework to achieve the desired outcome. This theoretical framework also demonstrates the relationship the creative outcome has to the exegesis. The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope is made up of five levels:

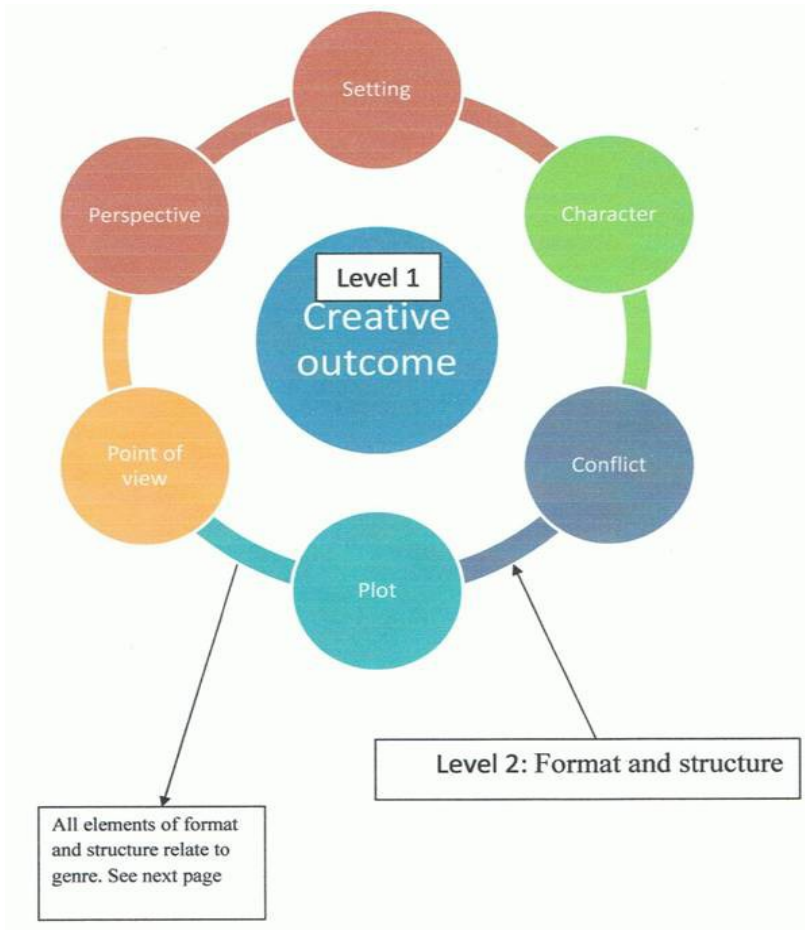
1. **Creative outcome:** the desired finished creative piece
2. **Format and structure:** point of view, perspective, setting, plot structure, voice, character, conflict, which are used to identify genre
3. **Genre:** codes and conventions of the genre, which are used to identify discipline
4. **Discipline:** identifies through generic codes and conventions specific areas of research

5. **Area of research:** information and theoretical frameworks that can be employed to enrich the creative outcome and give direction to the exegesis.

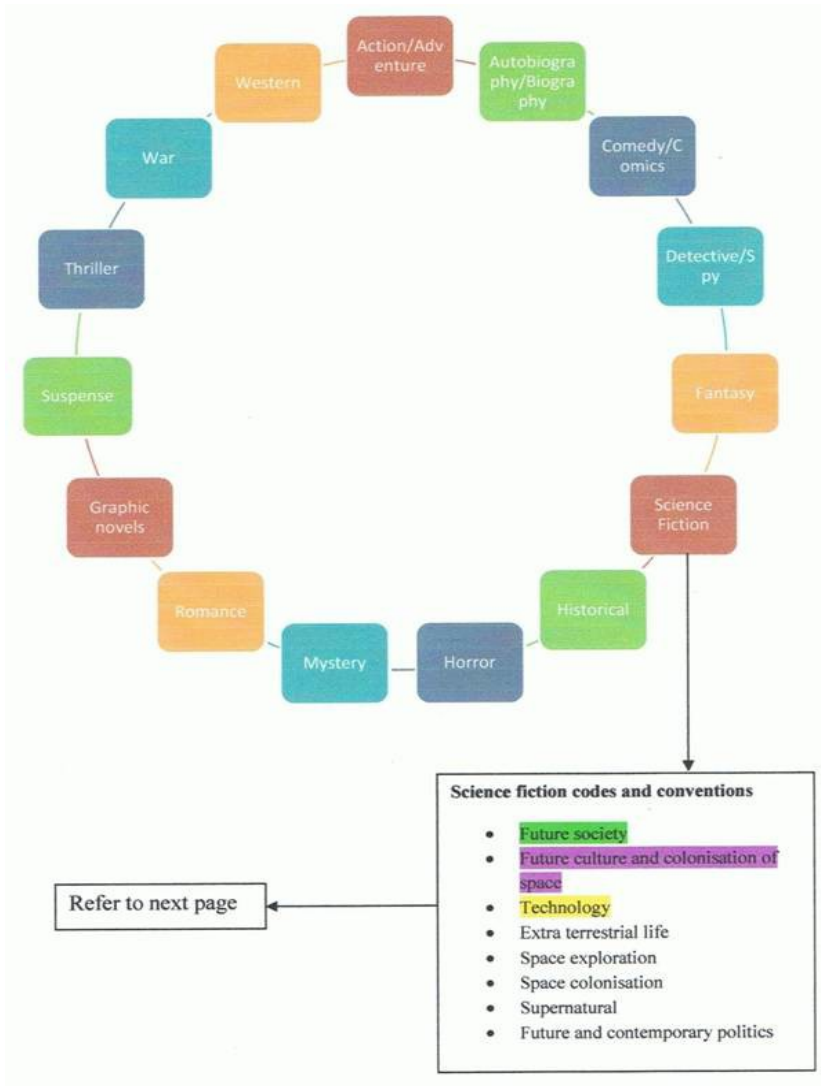
The metaphor of the kaleidoscope is evocative. As you twist a kaleidoscope different areas *light* up, or in the case of the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope, different areas *line* up. The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope is also versatile in that it can be utilised from the first level to fifth level, or vice versa, meaning that the research can inform the creative outcome or the creative outcome can inform the research, depending on the approach of the student. For example, we might begin at the top level with a desired creative outcome, which in this case will be a hypothetical science fiction novel. On the second level we have format and structure (the futuristic plot, a technological setting, possibly aliens or robots as characters and so on). This informs the third level, genre, finding us located in the science fiction genre. From here we delve into codes and conventions of the science fiction genre and take them to the fourth level, academic disciplines. Beneath the disciplines we find the specific research area. At this point we can identify which research areas cater for the science fiction codes and conventions the creative outcome is going to utilise, and this gives us an established theoretical framework. The important thing here is to be as specific as possible. We are not going to do a PhD in each of these disciplines, but they are going to give us direction, theory, and knowledge integral to enriching the creative outcome and progressing its themes and discourses.

The following Figures 1-5 demonstrate the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope by identifying exegetical research paths for a science fiction novel and better linking the creative and exegetical components for a research higher degree. Figure 6 demonstrates the theoretical framework mapped through the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope for my doctorate of creative arts, *Assimilating Eden*.

**Figure 1. First two levels of the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope: The creative outcome at level 1 and the format and structure at level 2**

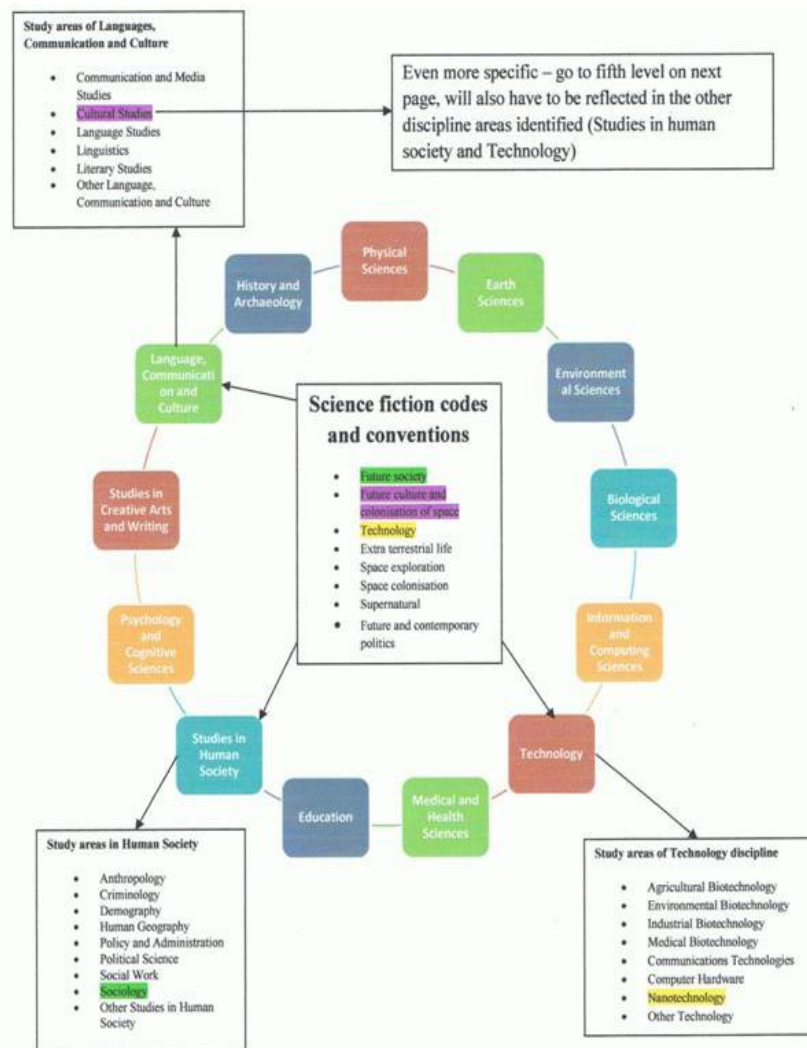


**Figure 2. Third level of the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope: Genre, used to narrow content to a specific discipline (note: for the purpose of this example, not all genres are represented).**

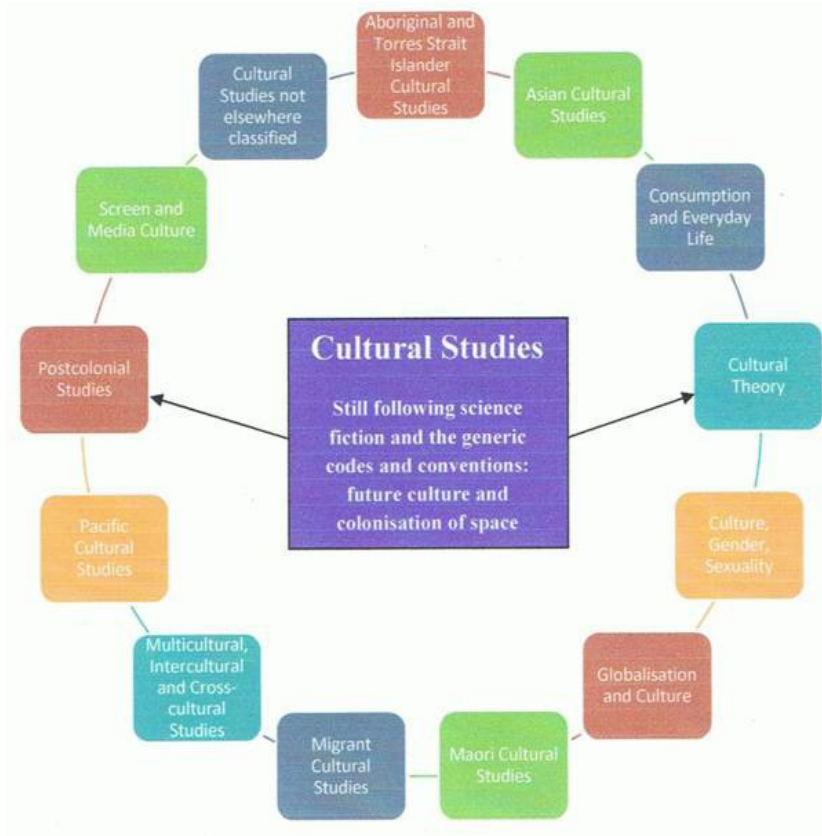




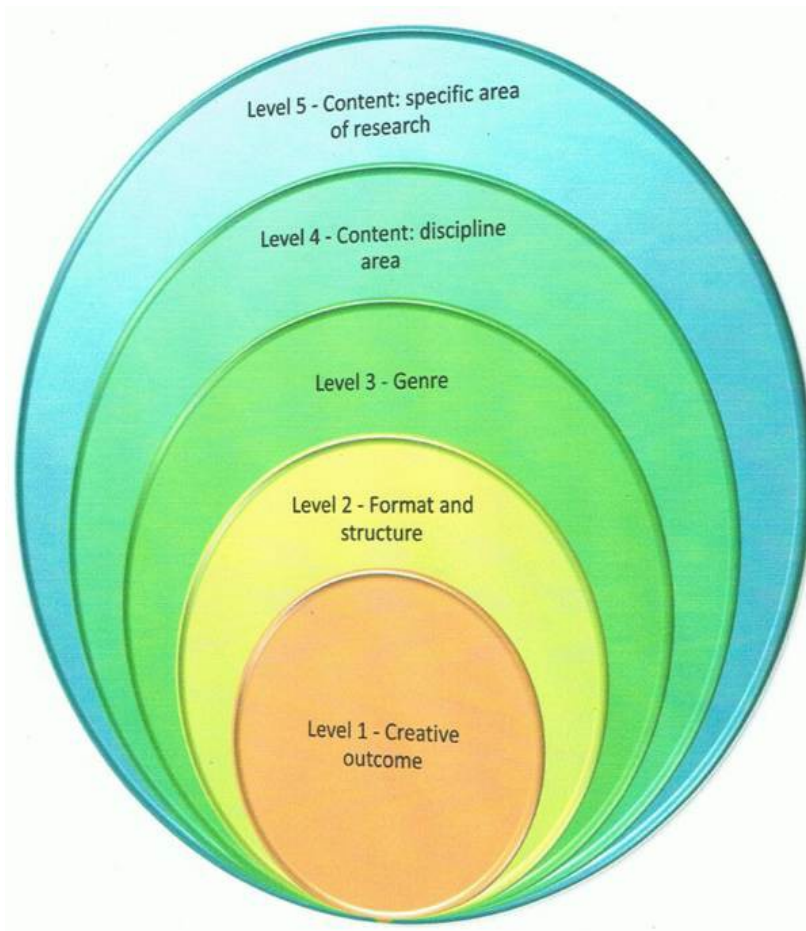
**Figure 3. Fourth level of the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope: specifying related disciplines and narrowing further to field of study (note: for the purpose of this example, not all disciplines listed in the *Australia and New Zealand Standard Research Classification 2008* are represented).**



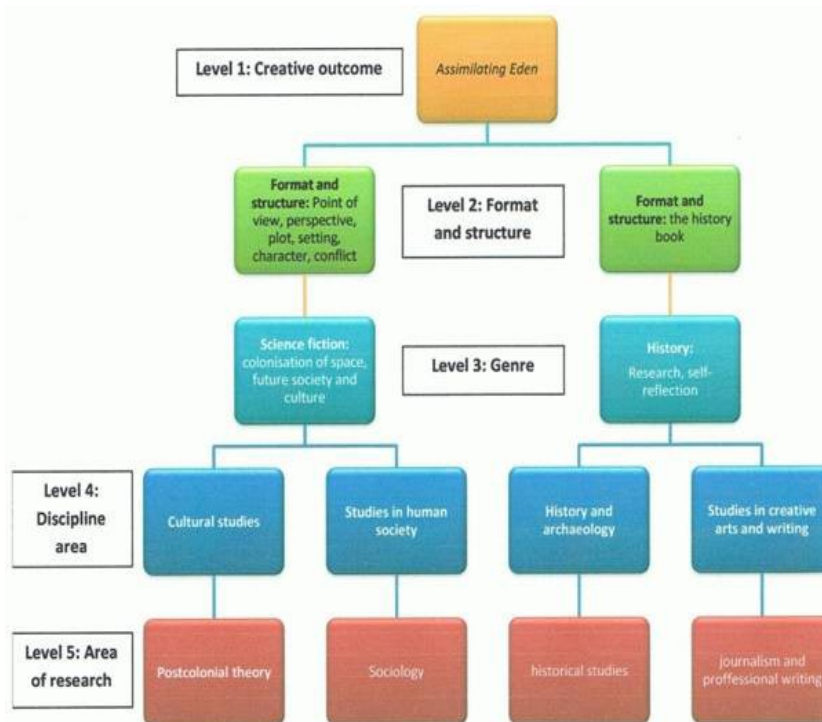
**Figure 4. Fifth level of the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope: specific area of research**



**Figure 5. Simplified overview of Creative Writing Kaleidoscope**



**Figure 6. Methodologically plotted course of *Assimilating Eden* using Creative Writing Kaleidoscope**



The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope allows researchers to establish an eclectic approach to their project and specify areas of research, giving them a methodology. This is establishing not just *what* they are going to look at, but *how* they are going to look at it and this is what methodology is. The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope caters for the research needs of every student, regardless of how diverse their novel might be, and whether they write the creative outcome first, corresponding to, or after the exegesis.

Although the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope is broad in the range of disciplines it covers, it is still a clear theoretical framework that can be applied to all creative writing projects, and this commonality should address the problem of inconsistencies of approach between different students and institutions. This methodology can be used as a starting point and promotes better planning of higher degree projects and hopefully results in richer creative outcomes. Employing the Creative Writing Kaleidoscope will establish a deliberate link between the research in the exegesis and the creative outcome, marrying them together, rather than approaching them as separate projects.

The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope does not situate creative writing in a particular discipline or single theoretical framework, but rather acknowledges that creative writing is multi-disciplinary and an eclectic approach to higher degrees is advisable. This demonstrates that creative writing as a discipline is unique. It has the ability to tap into any discipline in an academic institution depending on the content of the creative outcome. Therefore, it should be embraced for its diversity and networking potential, rather than being marginalised into particular disciplines or theoretical frameworks that may not cater for its needs.

## Conclusion

The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope suggests students of the discipline should have a primary supervisor who has a background in format and structure and, if possible, the particular genre. This should not be too hard with the amount of students completing doctoral degrees in creative writing at universities. But it also identifies that students need to employ theoretical frameworks of other disciplines, and this means that they should have co-supervision from academics from within those disciplines. This is where the primary supervisor has to sit back and be objective. They may be extremely knowledgeable in format and structure of creative writing, but having a doctoral degree in creative writing does not make them an expert in specific content areas. The student's best interests need to be put first. As a result I would suggest that creative writing students will often need more than one co-supervisor, and if the particular institution does not provide for a specific content area needing to be engaged with by the student, that they are not forced into the framework of an irrelevant discipline area. This may require that supervision becomes cross-institutional, which should be beneficial to all those involved.

Creative writing is no stranger to the academy as all writing, especially when writing arguments, requires a certain amount of creativity on the author's part. Creative writing as a discipline appears to have a very strong future. I really struggled with the decision to do a doctorate of creative arts over a doctorate of philosophy, but in the end it was McLuhan's (1964: 7) simple phrase 'the medium is the message' that made up my mind. I did not want to target an audience who would only read my material because they had an interest in the field of study. I wanted to reach that wider audience where my themes and discourses, presented as fiction, but informed by academic research, could have an impact on a potentially much larger readership that would not otherwise be exposed to those ideas. This idea is demonstrated by the influence Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* has had on the public's perception of religion (in Hjarvard 2006: 3). Creative writing has the ability to impact on readers' reality and that makes it a legitimate area of study. The academy needs to be patient and nurture the development of creative writing as a discipline. The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope will hopefully be a foundation on which to continue building solid methodological practices for the discipline.

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