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Writing/rights: creative practice and political action

Abstract:
Recently a number of conferences and exhibitions have focused on the relationship between creative practice and human rights, and writers, visual and performance artists and others have protested human rights abuses and/or made work that specifically responds to current problems. But what is art capable of doing in the face of global political events, economic problems and socio-cultural catastrophes - and what is its responsibility? This paper discusses some ideas that emerge from the literature, and also some trends in Australian publishing after September 11.

At one point in her very funny, very raunchy stand-up performance show *Revolution* (2004), American comedienne Margaret Cho grows momentarily serious and states: 'Artists are supposed to comment on culture: that's the function of art.' In her own art, her focus remains firmly on such commentary. She tackles the tendency in society to abuse people on the basis of their ethnicity, their religion, their sexuality, the colour of their skin, or any of those many markers of difference with which we are all familiar. She uses her artform - humour - to skewer conservative values when they work to the detriment of vulnerable groups; to comment on, criticize and seek to correct practices that lead to infringements of human rights. And, as that cited comment suggests, for her this is the function of creative practice: not merely to follow an aesthetic, or satisfy an intellectual or artistic curiosity, but to use one's creative practice to intervene in social wrongs.

Cho is not alone in this view. There is a long history of creative practitioners being politically active, aware and concerned; and artists and students are typically in the vanguard of mass social movements. Many others share her belief that this is the function of art, and that art can be effective: think for instance of Shelley and his insistence that poets are the world's legislators. But for every artist who uses their work as a weapon against human rights abuses, there are others who ignore social problems, or who support the forces of domination. And while many are convinced that creative work can have an impact, others remain dubious - as seen in WH Auden's complaint that 'poetry makes nothing happen', or John Carey's slightly derisive question, 'what good are the arts?' (Carey 2005).

Creative practitioners as activists?

While many creative practitioners are, of course, intensely concerned about social justice, in a recent research project we found few who see social action as the real point of their creative practice. Generally speaking, the view among

writers, painters and musicians seems to be that their first responsibility *as artists* is to their creative work; that any action they might take to repair the damaged things of the world is a function of their broader identity *as human beings*. In other words, it is the responsibility of all human beings, and not particularly or specifically of artists, to take action to conduct their own lives in an ethical fashion. Painter Lorraine Webb, for instance, insists that she has no responsibility *as an artist* to take on the problems of human rights abuses; that if she did so it would render her work 'boring and one-dimensional'; but that still 'artists do reflect their times, and so, as a person who cares deeply about human rights issues, that is bound to come out sometimes in my work' (Webb 2002).

So we have two creative practitioners; both concerned about human rights issues; but taking very different positions of the responsibility of creative work to the problem of politics. Is it after all 'the function of art to comment on culture' in that critical, interventionism manner that Cho calls for? Or is it rather the responsibility of artists to pursue their work, relying on the notion that their politics and their concern for human rights will simply 'come out' in the work? This apparent contradiction is a starting point for us in our attempt to explore how creative writers do, or might, engage in critical commentary on contemporary social politics, and how their work might intervene in brutal performances of power.

The present time provides many examples of the game of power, and the abuse of the vulnerable. Over the past few years in Australia we have witnessed the Children Overboard episode, the inhuman treatment of refugees, the so-called 'war on terror', military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, the more local traumas in East Timor and the Solomons, the shadowy presence of David Hicks (who was allowed to exist, for some five years, as a non-person) … the list goes on. Where are the Australian stories about these events? And whose responsibility is it to tell those stories? In Tess Brady's 2006 article 'The roof is on fire: the academic writer and social critique', she urges writers to pay attention; to tell stories designed to ameliorate harm. She describes her own politicisation as a writer and a social commentator and notes:

> I could see that the application of what I knew - my writing craft - empowered my community by giving them a way of talking about their organisation, themselves. I began to understand just what is meant by the phrase *writing is powerful*. (Brady 2006)

Distraction, for Brady, is the central device that keeps the community (including its writers) from paying sustained attention to injustices, or from calling our governments to account for failures to protect the rights not only of citizens, but of any human beings. And she finishes with a call to arms, one directed at academics:

> I can only point this out and hope that some of you will avoid the conservative device of distraction and move your research agendas into finding language to constructively critique our world. (Brady 2006)

While we fully support this call, we wonder whether it shouldn't be extended beyond those who have research agendas, and include those who see themselves first as creative writers rather than researchers - extend it to the wider literary community, the wordsmiths, the weavers of stories.

What good are the arts?

Are Australian writers responding to and reflecting the social and human aspects of 'these times', commenting critically on this culture? Is it their responsibility to do so? Perhaps. Although art makes no one better, necessarily, as the Third Reich showed so dreadfully (see Carey 2005: 142), creative works can bring into consciousness and hence into social awareness things that might otherwise be overlooked, or be differently framed. Storytelling, in particular, is a knowledge practice with a very long history. Socrates continues to lay his spell through the scripts in which Plato wrote his pedagogical dialogues; Augustine used the memoir to write theology; TS Eliot's poems did triple duty as art, philosophy and social critique. We can identify such writings as having value beyond their literary merit: as having the capacity to illuminate how people think, and how they treat one another. And, of course, we have the examples of writers who used their knowledge of social structure and organization to write creative works that profoundly engaged practices of inhumanity and had lasting political effect: for instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (published 1852 against slavery), Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* (published 1948 against pre-apartheid South African racism),[1] Charles Dickens' oeuvre, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (published 1906 against economic exploitation of workers), or Sally Morgan's *My Place* (published 1987 to express the history of Australia's Stolen Generations and the material effects on the families caught up in this policy). Many others have written in such a way that acts of inhumanity are taken up and challenged by the logic of story - perhaps to no obvious or immediate political effect, but still they put on the record that things were not necessarily as good as they might be; that there might be better and more ethical ways of engaging with one another.

We decided to investigate the current Australian literary landscape to see if we could determine to what extent local writers of fiction and poetry were taking on, overtly, the current political events - events associated with infringements of human rights. To do this we read a randomly selected half of the works published in 2003 and 2004 by selected Australian publishers: including large and small presses, generalist publishers, small independents and prominent literary journals.[2] We interviewed the relevant publishers and the editors, and we conducted archival investigations into the issue of human rights. Our project gave equal value to official commentary, philosophical discourse, conversation, newspaper articles and poetry in its attempt to come up with some ideas about how Australian writers in those two years were addressing their times - times marked by massive human rights abuses.

A question we came up against, and considered extensively, was whether it is reasonable to expect writers to address their times critically: to use their art as a form of social action. Theodor Adorno is the philosopher routinely cited when this question is asked. His famous (and frequently misquoted) phrase, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno 1981: 34), is invoked as a sort of incantation when the question of art and human rights is raised. This seems to be saying - and is often taken to be saying - that it's too late for poetry, that there is no value in poetry, that poetry did nothing in the face of the horror that was Auschwitz, and what can we expect it to do now. Not much, maybe; and why should it? Poetry, like any creative practice, is - famously - for art's sake alone. It remains, in the language of the creative domain, 'autonomous', which is to say, free: not bound by responsibility, necessity, or social and economic obligation. It is in the truest sense a floating signifier and a floating practice: available for different purposes, by different people, in different social, historical and cultural contexts. From this point of view any creative work is simply a human practice or artifact that might be put to work today for the pure

celebration of life, tomorrow to celebrate the tyrants. It is a human practice because it is something that humans do, just as they 'do' banking, or sewing, or gardening.

At the same time, it can be seen as a human rights practice because when a creative work works, it captures its readers or viewers, and tells something about being. An arresting portrait of a fictional character, such as Ben Okri's spirit child, can make us connect across cultures and generations. A vivid description of a setting, such as the Africa of Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*, may remind readers that they, like others, are bodies in space, with bodily needs. The rendering of quotidian moments and objects, such as we find in William Carlos Williams' 'Red Wheelbarrow', may remind readers of the particularity of the most ordinary objects. Such works are in some ways gestures towards human rights, because they are about being in the world, being human, and being part of the community of humans who share the property of qualia - the feeling of being - and the small pleasures of life.

Any collection of quotations on writing will provide numerous accounts of its power to touch others, and to effect change. These two, for instance, are beautifully expressions of what these two writers see as central to creative practice:

> We use the grand and beautiful facts of existence in order to put up with the horrors that afflict us directly in our families and friends, or through the newspapers and TV. The horrors are not to be denied … The list is endless and crushing if we do not creatively oppose it. Which means writing as cure. Not completely, of course … I won't use the word "therapy", it's too clean, too sterile a word. I only say when death slows others, you must leap to set up your diving board and dive head first into your typewriter. (Ray Bradbury 1994: xiv)

Or:

> [Writers] have always believed in the power of words to change history. Words can be said to be the very source of our being and in fact the very substance of the cosmic life force we call man. Spirit, the human soul, our self awareness, our ability to perceive the world as the world and not just as our locality, and lastly our capacity for knowing that we shall die, and living in spite of the knowledge, surely all these are created by words. (Vaclav Havel, cited Riddell 1999: 102)

This is not to say that every poem enacts a commentary on culture that is directed towards human rights issues. Many creative works are about the internal life of the writer, or someone's broken heart; some are just a bit of fluff.

The problem of 'human rights'

Still, given the vagueness that surrounds the term 'human rights', who is to say conclusively if a work addresses its concerns or not? The term is both under- and over-defined. It is over-defined in that it has been so widely used that it seems both commonplace and commonsense; so much so that 'we all' know about human rights. And why not? We do now live in what is called the 'age of rights' (Bobbio 1996: 32), at a point in history when, as human rights lawyer Costas Douzinas says (2006), human rights have triumphed in the world. Yet, as he goes on to point out, 'our enlightened age has witnessed the greatest

infringements of human rights. … This is a paradox, a triumph drowned in disaster,' because if 'we all' share the concern for human rights, why are we experiencing such conflict? This is perhaps an indication of the under-definition of the term. We know and do not know what it means (Ishay 2004: 3-4); it is recondite, variable, slippery - in every way an empty signifier, and hence not easily put to work to protect whatever it is we mean by 'human rights'.

Not only is it difficult to define human rights with any consistency; we can barely define what we mean by the term 'human', or recognise the humanity of others, as Shakespeare has Shylock point out in *The Merchant of Venice*:

> *I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?*

Despite this eloquent appeal Shylock is never really acknowledged as a human, even by the other characters in the play who are frantically trying to preserve the rights of another human being. This is a problem for any project that attempts to mobilize the language and the legal force of human rights, because before one can even begin to consider what 'human rights' means, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by human. Joseph Slaughter notes:

> From its inception, human rights law has relied on both philosophical inquiry into, and sociological understanding of, the nature of human subjectivity, whether explicitly expressed or implicitly referenced. The nature of our understanding of human subjectivity is central to any thorough discussion of human rights. (Slaughter 1997: 407)

If we can't agree on the question of subjectivity, how can we know whether to include all members of *homo sapiens sapiens* in the category of 'human', or only *people like us*. How we determine subjectivity has a bearing on how we treat each other, in legal and personal terms. It has a bearing on whose stories we tell, and how we frame those stories.

Writing/rights

Creative works come into the equation here because people expect a great deal of art and of artists (including writers and writing) when it comes to making statements about who is human, and how it is to be human. Art is said by some to 'reveal' something essential about the universe or humanity; it 'inspires'; more negatively, it is elitist and unrepresentative; or, it is made by, and appreciated by, only a superior sort of person. Art leads people away from god's truth, or from reasoned argument; it can change the world, bring to light the many forms of repression under which we all live, light a beacon on the hill, rouse sentiment and passion - et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. In other words, creative work is good *and* bad; committed *and* alienated; all about human rights *and* all about personal fame and fortune; selfless *and* selfish; at once entirely intertwined in the mesh of human existence, and at the same time standing outside the hurly burly. It is in short, as we suggested above, something humans do. However, there is one thing art does that sets it aside from other human activities, that distinguishes it from banking, or sewing, or

gardening. Creative works deliberately, consciously, use modes of representation, and so they make us look again, and differently, at the things around us. Whatever its origin or its point of view, creative work is always about making meaning. Its meanings are not necessarily clear and certainly not fixed, but they are capable of being discussed. And it need not come up with any solutions, or resolutions; just as long as it offers a reminder that we're all in this together, draws attention to abuses, asks questions, or keeps its attention on the complexities of living in a world marked by competing interests, needs and priorities. New Zealand writer Vincent O'Sullivan insists:

> It's enough for most of us that art gets on with the job in its direct, untheorised way, giving us that lift in intensity, its jolt into *paying attention*. Which is why Impressionism and its allies bring this off most vividly for those whose usual business isn't art - which means almost everyone. Look, Degas and the rest of them tell you, look at this moment which is so worth attending to, the pulse of exactly what it is to be here now. And the muffled drumbeat that is flickering there as well - the fact that even as you see it, it is about to go, elegy moving in on delight. In half a second's time that ballet dancer's foot will be on another stair, so take in its form, its scintillations, while you have the chance. (O'Sullivan 2002: 20)

Similarly, maybe all writers need to do in response to their social context is draw attention, pay attention, respond, reflect and react. *Be* in society, from the inside; *comment* on society, *reflect* it, from the inside. For the most part writers do just this, and perhaps do not need to keep harping on about inhumanity, because after all, a writer invested in the everyday is likely to bring to light the grey areas too, the hidden abuses. Andre Brink, a South African novelist who advocates a strong link between writing and social commentary, describes the state of emergency that exists at the heart of all societies, whether it resides in 'economics, in the situation of women, in the attitude to gay sexuality, [or] the accommodation of foreigners'. All nations have their own versions of abuse; and Brink writes that artists can open these situations up to the 'conscious life of that society' (Brink 1989: 27). He was not advocating that we must always drag the political into our works, but 'that any writer can only write anything of significance if it is drawn from his or her own most profound' experience. In his view, as long as a writer is making work seriously, from observations and experiences, that work will necessarily be political because it will be open to the conscious life of the society; it will demand that all in a society acknowledge the responsibility they bear to each other (Brink 1989: 26).

Looking at local writing

Not surprisingly, the editors and publishers we interviewed had pretty variant perspectives on this. None would say that human rights issues have no place in the world of writing, of course, but they differed considerably on the responsibility they considered their own publishing house or literary journal to bear. Smaller publishers tend to see their role as somewhat in the Margaret Cho domain: that they bear a responsibility to comment on, and even to intervene in, culture to remedy wrongs. One small publisher stated that the *raison d'être* of her house has from the beginning been the task of promoting poetry and fiction that addresses the place in the world of minorities and the oppressed. Another expressed the view that good writing can change the way people see the world:

> I like to get manuscripts that push the boundaries, that make people think, because ideally, by the time that you have read a book, you should feel different from what you are at the beginning. The books that I have found to be the most interesting myself are where at the end I have suddenly shifted, a sort of pragmatic shift in some ways, and I have made different connections from what I held before I read the book, and the world is suddenly different from what it was before. They are the books that have always changed my life and really affected me and they are the ones that we are looking for.[3]

The larger publishers, on the other hand, seemed to take Lorraine Webb's view - that the important issue is the quality of the work, and that anyway any creative practitioner will necessarily reflect their times and how they personally feel about events, so we don't have to do it deliberately. They expressed concern too with the wider issues of the market - with what will sell, and how to get works out to readers. One, for instance, pointed to the difficulty writers have in crossing the space between what they want to write and what readers want to read, saying:

> There are very few who are both, if you like, qualified literary writers and also commercial in the sense of, dare I say it, being a very good read. … I mean if you're going to get published, you've got to write for a reader. And normally with a manuscript where the quality is reasonably assured, you look first for whether there is a market.

This is hardly surprising; all those we spoke to, whether publishers of small circulation journals or big players in the Australian scene, pointed to the pressure-cooker environment that is contemporary publishing as a major effect on the field. They spoke of the difficulty of dealing with the avalanche of unsolicited manuscripts; the importance of marketing (despite the fact that virtually none admitted to doing any market research at all); of books having a shelf life that is 'shorter than yoghurt'; and of the sheer difficulty of getting books onto the shelves of bookstores. This is particularly a problem for small publishers, many of whom cannot get any books at all into the major selling chains. One publisher said: 'there's a chain of really good booksellers who support us … I could name about ten booksellers, but that's not enough to keep us going. You go out to other booksellers and they look blank and say, *oh there's no market for your type of books*.' (And they may be right: several publishers we interviewed said they had observed that people are buying fewer books, and from a narrower range of types.) Small publishers, and publishers of poetry and literary fiction, rely for distribution on independent booksellers who themselves are facing enormous hurdles to economic survival. Jeremy Fisher's instructive article in the April 2006 issue of *TEXT* outlines the economic context of Australian publishing; but while the industry may be healthy overall, it is still facing immense economic problems - especially at the smaller or more literary end of the market. So while some publishers may have a commitment to getting out work that deals with the human rights issues of our times, this is always tempered by their own struggle to survive, and the knowledge that, first and foremost, they have to pick winners.

In this context it may seem a touch self-indulgent for us to ask why publishers are not producing more works that directly and critically take on contemporary human rights abuses: those abuses, that is, that are (often) state-initiated, global in scale and shocking to most viewers - the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, for instance, or the detention of already-traumatised refugee children in Australia. But it seems that the lacuna in works of this nature is not driven

simply economic imperatives. The editors we interviewed had not noticed any increased trend in the last few turbulent years towards human rights issues being reflected in content or form or work they receive. One publisher pointed out that while the problem of major human rights abuses has been 'coming into consciousness especially from around 2000, 2001', it has emerged mainly in nonfiction. Editors at this publishing house have not noticed a pronounced increase in attention to the current international-level human rights issues in recent years in fiction, or creative works more generally. Instead, it is what one called the 'tried and true', more 'local' human rights issues - immigration, racism, family concerns - that are being dealt with, 'as they always have been'.

There are exceptions, of course. One is found in the rise of nonfiction manuscripts that deal with human rights as current events - which when published are also selling well. A second is found in literary journals; some of the editors reported a small increase in submissions of poetry and short fiction that are clearly responding to contemporary human rights abuses. Neither exception is surprising: as one publisher pointed out, whereas 'fiction tends to have a slower percolation time, poetry can happen quite fast'. As can short stories. It may be that our findings with regard to fiction are a result of the long lead time from the germ of an idea for a novel to the completing of a quality manuscript to the publishing and editing process and finally, to the bookshop shelves. Certainly on the international scene a number of novels have emerged recently that directly address the 2001 attack on the United States of America, the London bombings of 2005, or are more generally a response to globalized war - an indication that writers have been digesting the events, and coming up with characters, story and mood to put on record how it seems to them. And, in the past year or so, several significant Australian novels that directly address these issues have been published.[4]

Where nonfiction is concerned, the differential rate of the emergence of human rights-directed manuscripts can be attributed to the different research practices and writing practices involved in nonfiction and fiction. One publisher said:

> people who write fiction - quality fiction - it often takes them years and years to write, so what is current is not necessarily the manuscript you get unless it's commissioned and you're doing nonfiction. People will often talk about and be writing about something for years and years, and it's not something that's really influenced by current political situations, because the fiction writers are often in their own world and with more universal issues than current politics, which is a really transient situation ...

It may also be an indication of the different expectations readers have of fiction and nonfiction: for fiction, we would argue, it is not enough for work to reflect a particular political situation that is very much tied to a moment in time. A work of fiction must bring forth wider and deeper concerns, or it risks becoming irrelevant after a time - and, perhaps worse from a publisher's point of view, it risks becoming economically unviable. As one of our interlocutors said:

> We've had quite a few [fiction] manuscripts which feature the current political situation in Australia, for example, and I've rejected them on the basis that politics changes, and books like that have very short shelf lives.

Publishers, especially smaller ones, need to be confident that backlisting a work is going to be viable for some time to come, so that there is some chance

of selling their print runs.

Journals are in a different position from book publishers. They often run themed issues and can choose to have a very specific human rights theme. For example, *Southerly* recently ran an issue dedicated to asylum seekers and outsider art. However, not all choose to do that. *Meanjin* is certainly not averse to publishing fiction, nonfiction or poetry that addresses broad human rights issues, but the commitment of the journal's editors is above all to the quality of the writing, as this seems to be the best way to build and keep a broad subscriber base and ensure the survival, and the prospering, of *Meanjin*. (This is not to suggest that other journals do not share the strong commitment to the quality of writing; but each has its own overarching concern about the journal, its place and function, and its market.)

Like many of the publishers and editors we interviewed, we are a bit ambivalent about the extent to which art can possibly matter in the face of the horrifying situations dotted across our world and presented in living colour each night on the television news. Nonetheless, we retain a perhaps somewhat naïve hope that it can make a difference, that art has an essential role in bringing about change in the world. For researchers with this belief, the work of reading the material published in 2003 and 2004 was somewhat depressing. We read around 100 works - novels (not limited to literary fiction - we wanted to see what was going on in the writing world at large), short story collections, poetry anthologies and poetry monographs, intended in the main for adult readers. Few dealt head-on with human rights issues, Australian or otherwise. There were exceptions - an anthology of stories, for example, written by high school students around refugee issues and published by Wakefield Press, *Dark dreams: Australian refugee stories*. Within poetry anthologies there was the occasional poem took a human rights issues specifically as its theme.

There were a number of works that had contemporary human rights matter woven tightly into their fabric: for example, Stephen Spear's *Murder at the Fortnight* (Wakefield Press again) takes place in a truly multicultural world where the chief cop is Vietnamese, and the criminals are a mix of nationalities. While racial tension/racism is not the dominant theme, the very 'otherness' of the characters compared to the usual characters of Australian crime fiction is in some way a foregrounding of difference that highlights the plurality of Australian culture and the Australian community.

Interestingly the works that dealt in a direct and explicit manner with refugee issues, terrorism and other human rights concern appear to be those published for young adult readers. This readership was not included in our research project, but while going through the publishers' lists for 2003 and 2004, we became aware of the large number of books published in this category relative to all other categories and of the tendency for hard issues to be addressed in hard ways. A question we'll be following up in a later project is why this is so.

Conclusion

For now, let's go back to Theodor Adorno's famous line, that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Adorno's phrase is routinely cited in discussions about what art can do, and what artists ought to do, about the state of the world; and is associated with Adorno's scepticism, or despair, about the point of art after Auschwitz; that in the face of the barbarism of the twentieth century, it's too late for aesthetics; that there is no value in art for art's sake, or in consolatory or optimistic art; that the only art that can matter, and is ethical to

make, is political, or what Adorno himself termed 'committed' art. There are many valid critiques of Adorno's assertion; Dominick LaCapra, for instance, asks why Holocaust should be considered more tragic, and more finally meaningful, than all the other acts of violence throughout history (LaCapra 1999). Certainly the Holocaust raises a very serious question of how one can believe that every event ultimately serves some divine purpose, but the problem of evil is hardly new. To give Adorno his due, it does seem both reasonable and human that he should have had this overwhelming, totalizing reaction in the wake of an overwhelming, totalizing force which had used art, or aesthetics, among its tools. The music, the choreographed street theatre, the uniforms: all were about what Adorno (1974: 237) termed 'absolute sensation' if not beauty, and were tinged always to varying degrees by the horror that is the Sublime. Then too, it is probably worth pointing out that Adorno isn't opposed to poetry per se, but he is opposed to romantic or idealised art, what he calls 'helpless poems to the victims of our time', art that is commercial, a 'fetish' or 'idle pastime'. His argument is that the first responsibility of creative practitioners is to avoid making 'an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed' (Adorno 1997: 189).

This raises a difficult question for writers: how can we express the inexpressible without exploiting those in its grip? This was a concern voiced over and again in publisher interviews - fiction that trivializes, that steals stories, or that is didactic, is not going to be published. South African poet Antjie Krog, who was contracted to report on the TRC, wrote: 'One has no right to appropriate a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction'; and then later, 'No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this. … If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die' (Krog 1998: 49). The sentiment behind what she writes is close to Adorno's demand that art have a reason to exist; that it not 'surrender to cynicism' or fall into romantic or consolatory fantasies, but that it be put to the work of witnessing, and of remembering suffering and the sufferers.

So far our research has shown that there is a space waiting for that witnessing, for work that engages with the society and political reality of the suffering in the world in our little part of it. We need writers to keep writing it; we need publishers to publish it; and we need readers who want more from their reading than an escape from the present time.

Notes

1 Although these works now attract an enormous amount of critical commentary for their representations of African Americans and black South Africans respectively, we should not forget that in their time they offered powerful rebukes to the political and discursive structures of their day and, by presenting black people *as* people, captured the hearts and, more importantly, the consciences of at least some members of the dominant white community. return to text

2 It's worth noting that approaches to the really large publishers to grant us an interview were mostly rebuffed; perhaps we can't say 'rebuffed', because we couldn't even reach the editorial staff, protected as they were by layers of impenetrable administration. This limited the scope of our project, but expanded our insights into how the publishing sector works, and its concerns about 'commenting on culture'. return to text

3. This and all the other quotations from publishers were derived from interviews conducted during 2004 and 2005. return to text

4 We note particularly Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006) and Andrew McGahan's *Underground* (2006). return to text

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