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Creating fiction: Bourdieu's theory and writing practice

Abstract

This paper discusses how Pierre Bourdieu's framework of field, habitus and capital can help to conceptualise creative writing practice. Using the work-in-progress of one of the authors (Gonsalves) as a case study, this paper shows that writing is a direct result of the interaction between the literary field and the writer's habitus. Notions of what is creative in writing practice have been influenced by the literary field, which in turn has shaped the habitus. The paper describes how these forces partly shape the selection of ideas and words, the creation of sentences, characters and plot, and the process of editing and rewriting.[1]

Introduction

Late in the evening, early in this century, to twist the opening lines of Zadie Smith's first novel *White Teeth*, I went to the first class of my postgraduate creative writing degree at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Most of us in the room had worked as writers in journalism or advertising or film and television, but had never written fiction before and we wanted to know how to start. Do you start with a man or a woman? A place? A colour? A phrase? What were the rules? Our lecturer Jan Hutchinson calmed us down and said, 'There are no rules'. Of course, this left us totally confused but it also freed us to start, to end, to start again from whichever place we chose, with whomever we chose.

Some years later, I am about to hand in to my agent a manuscript of my first novel that I hope will tempt some publishers. And what I have come slowly to realise is that while there are no rules when writing fiction, in fact good fiction is about breaking rules, as most will agree; there are *forces* at play that helped shape my path towards becoming a writer. What are these forces and how did they shape my practice?

To make sense of my development as a writer, we have turned to the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu was a prolific and influential writer - his theory of practice has found applications in fields as diverse as:

linguistic exchange, the political uses of language, museum attendance, the social uses of photography, marriage rites and ritual exchange among the Kabyle and the social origins and trajectories of French university students, academics and intellectuals ... (Johnson 1993: 1-2)

In the domain of writing and literature, part of what Bourdieu refers to as 'the field of cultural production', his theory sees the writer as both free and constrained: the writer creates but this creative practice exists in a *field* which is a social space of competition. The *field* shapes and constrains the writer's attitudes and strategies, or what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*. Since *field* and *habitus* are important concepts in Bourdieu's theory, I will explain them more fully.

The field and habitus of literary production

Let's first talk about field, in this case the literary field which is made up of publishers, booksellers, agents, editors, critics, book clubs, writing schools such as the UTS writing program, newspapers and magazines that publish articles about books and writing, professional groups like the Australian Society of Authors and the NSW Writers Centre, support groups like Varuna Writers Centre, and of course, writers and readers. The basic idea is writers do not work in a vacuum - they work 'in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations (Johnson 1993: 6). Writers occupy different positions within the literary field depending on the type and amount of 'capital' they possess. There is, of course, economic capital, as measured by sales, profits and royalties, but other forms of capital that can mark the position of a writer include cultural capital such as knowledge and skills, social capital in the form of connections or membership in networks, and symbolic capital, the form these other types of capital can take on when they are regarded as legitimate (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Symbolic capital in the literary field can take the form of prestige, status or autonomy.

Bourdieu has described the literary field as:

the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. 'bourgeois art') and the autonomous principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake')... (Bourdieu 1993: 40)

Writers who subscribe to the latter principle see economic success 'as a sign of compromise' (1993: 40). Thus, we see Jonathan Franzen famously refusing to have his book listed on Oprah Winfrey's book club a few years ago, presumably because he associated Oprah with market production.

In order to become a writer, to enter the literary field, a person must have developed the relevant *habitus* - a structuring mechanism that operates within her or him that generates the desire and motivation to acquire the 'knowledge, or skill, or "talent" to be accepted as a legitimate player' (Johnson 1993: 8). The *habitus* provides a 'feel for the game'. It generates:

a practical sense ... that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The *habitus* is the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a 'second sense' or a second nature. (Johnson 1993: 5)

For novice writers, the process of learning the craft, of acquiring the practical sense, the *habitus*, of a competent writer can be slow and complex (cf Chan, Devery and Doran 2003 on the socialization of police recruits). In my own

experience, the metamorphosis from wanting to know the rules of fiction as a first-time fiction writer, to being about to submit a manuscript to prospective publishers did not happen in a vacuum or, as Dubois says 'as a kind of transcendent mystical activity' (2000: 87). This evolution was utterly social, and the production of my manuscript involved some major shifts in my own attitudes and values - changes in my own habitus. As Dubois points out, 'the text ... ceases being the isolated product of a largely overlooked process; it is the moment of creation, the culmination of a long and largely socialized genesis' (2000:97).

I now have a feel for the game the way I see it as being played. For example, I now have a sense of whether my writing is workable or needs to be rewritten, an increased confidence in my own ability to evaluate my work. This in no way means that my way of seeing or my feel for the game is right, or the only one. It's simply an accumulation of influences particular to my life and my position in the literary field.

This increased confidence to self-evaluate, and indeed to find a publisher, comes from the acquisition of capital: not economic capital, that hasn't happened yet, but cultural capital, which is the accumulation of knowledge and know-how about what writing requires. It also comes from the slow and ongoing accumulation of symbolic capital, recognition such as being selected for mentorships at Varuna Writers Centre, being shortlisted by Peter Bishop for the Varuna-Harper Collins Awards for Manuscript Development a couple of years ago, or securing a literary agent who already knew of my work. As Dubois points out, Bourdieu's theory:

asserts that literary practice must be understood as an action having meaning only in the interaction between different authorities, agents, and the well-ordered positions they occupy. In other words, any singular intervention in the field depends on an ensemble of differential positions belonging not only to writers, but also to their necessary partners: critics, editors, mediators of all kinds. In sum, the field is a social space that engages a collective history of its productions. (2000: 92)

My evolving habitus and writing practice

So how did I acquire this 'feel for the game'? Let me quote a poem written by a contemporary Indian poet and fiction writer, Eunice De Souza, who used to be the Head of the English Department at St Xavier's College, Bombay, where I did my undergraduate studies. This poem reflects the habitus of many aspiring writers in Bombay who for a long time didn't think Indians could be taken seriously as writers. It is entitled *My students*:

My students think it funny
That Daruwallas and de Souzas
Should write poetry.
Poetry is faery lands forlorn.
Women writers Miss Austen.
Only foreign men air their crotches

Bombay, the city that has been home to and written about extensively by Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra and so many other internationally-acclaimed writers, did not have a creative writing program until last year when Bombay University introduced a writing course. As we grew up and went to school and university, those of us who wanted to study something

creative studied English literature, and then we all wanted to work in a creative field, make use of our love of words - and for most of us that translated to either journalism or copywriting in advertising.

So, while my interest in writing was nurtured and began to evolve in Bombay, in actual fact my literary habitus was better nourished when I moved to Sydney and began to study at UTS where I received both encouragement and formal training. I immersed myself in the literary field and began to think of myself as a writer. This immersion in one city rather than in another, while seemingly a chance decision, is actually largely determined by the availability of opportunity to acquire cultural and symbolic capital.

Let me add here that the literary field is not geographically bound, especially in the age of broadband internet connections. So when I speak of the agency of readers or booksellers or literary prizes, I speak of these agents on a global scale, not just locally in Australia, although one could speak narrowly of the literary field in Sydney, or the literary field in Bombay. With reference to my own writing practice, while some agents may be local (eg, editors or support organizations like the ASA or Varuna), most agents in the literary field operate globally (eg readers, booksellers, publishers).

Hazel Smith in her book *The Writing Experiment* observes:

The popular belief is that writers have a special talent that is innate, that good writing is something that "just happens", and that most aspects of the writing process are inaccessible both to the writer and to outsiders. However, this belief is fundamentally flawed, since talent partly arises out of the learning of particular skills, and awareness about the choices available in the process of writing ... Self-awareness about the writing process is therefore crucial. ... There are no rules and regulations for creative writing, and no blueprints for a good piece of writing. However, strategies and techniques can be learnt. (2005: ix)

There are many strategies that I learnt from many sources, the most valuable being, as all my writing teachers and most writing workbooks say in different ways, 'Show up on the page'. Writers write, they don't just *think* about writing. And in the process, one word will lead to another, and eventually it will lead to a scene, a chapter, a first draft, as Kate Grenville suggests in *The Writing Book*:

Writers have to end up making sense, but they don't have to start off making sense ... You need to have a great untidy flow of characters, events, images and moods so that you can pick and choose, rather than having a poor thin heap. (1990: 4)

So I started off, and wrote the following somewhere in the year 2000. It was to be the beginning of my novel:

My name is Ella. Ella Da Gama. If I were a boy, my name would have been Louis. Not Loo-iss but Loo-eee, after Louis Armstrong who is daddy's favourite singer. But I was born a girl, so daddy named me Ella, after Ella Fitzgerald, who is daddy's second favourite singer. At every party, before they started the sing-song session, someone or the other would always say,

"Let's hear a song from Ella. C'mon Ella, ya-ya!"

My heart would wobble like pork fat at parties because I couldn't sing the high notes like the naankhatai band sings for the evening mass, and I didn't want to be embarrassed. But they were adults and they knew that God always provides.

In one of the many workshops at UTS, the most common criticism I got was 'Roanna, your writing is good but you have too many characters, it is very confusing for the reader.' This made me think about cutting down my characters, but I risked throwing the baby out with the bathwater. After all, I am writing a social realistic novel about a country with one billion people; I can't possibly write about a few characters in isolation.

Then Debra Adelaide, my teacher at UTS, read this work and gave me one of the most important pieces of feedback I have ever had. She said that while it was an interesting voice, could I sustain a whole novel in the limited voice of a child interpreting an adult world? I decided I couldn't do so: that I couldn't write the way Uzodinma Iwealla did in his brilliant book *Beasts of No Nation*. So I kept the characters and just changed the voice from first person to third person. It was still going to be the start of my book. But as you can imagine, it lost its punch in the third person and so, many thousands of words later, my friend and fellow writer Manisha Amin, at one of the writing group sessions where I had workshopped large amounts of my fiction, suggested that this was not a story about the children Ella and Melanie, it really was a story about the adults, about their aunty Lydia and her mother Felcie. So the first paragraph should really be about the main characters. I was stuck for a beginning and then Cathy Cole, my supervisor at UTS, suggested that I look at some of my favourite books and use the first line from each as a starting point and then write my own first paragraph. So, at the end of much frustration, I came up with this first paragraph by 20 December 2002:

When Felcie Da Gama opened her eyes, it was October. The scratch and curve of the outside world was mainly a matter for the municipality, but inside the flats of Salvation Apartments, past the kadappa steps and the white-washed walls, in the spaces where hushes are hushed, hopes hung on to, and snot swiped away with a checked handkerchief bought on the train, life was lived in long division.

By then I had been selected to go to Varuna for a week-long workshop with Charlotte Wood. Then in early 2003 I was selected again for a six-month Varuna mentorship, again with Charlotte Wood. It was during this period that I really started believing that I was a writer, pampered by the whole Varuna experience. Charlotte suggested I map out the events of my, by now, second draft. She also helped me see that the story really was about Lydia and Patrick. So, by 28 July 2006, my first paragraph looked like this:

In the cockcrow hours of an innocent Sunday, Lydia Da Gama lay on her mattress, tossing like a second thought. Her mother lay snoring, ignoring the dawn as it percolated through the curtains and rested on her face. Felcie Da Gama had never been one to mince priorities. Outside, the first sprouting calls could be heard, as they had been heard a million times before...

The dawn air hung as stiff as a starched sari. The flit of grass growing along the gutters, the flash of sky, the startling light of the sun at kick-off all danced around Salvation Apartments and the three and a half walls that surrounded it. The scratch and hiss of the outside world were mainly a matter for the

municipality buggers, the paan-spitting, money-grabbing buggers. But inside the compound of Salvation Apartments, up past the kadappa steps, the white-washed walls, the varnished doors, where hushes are hushed, hopes hung on to, and snot wiped away with checked handkerchiefs bought on the train, life was lived in long division.

When Lydia opened her eyes it was already June, already the day of Patrick's arrival.

Some months later I was accepted by a literary agent, Sophie Hamley from Cameron Cresswell. But she said that the beginning and end of the story were too rushed. By then I too had realized that my themes of death and desolation needed to be foreshadowed at least in the beginning. So by 4 April 2007, this is what the start of my novel looked like:

That year, the month of June insisted on insolence. Nights teetered on the verge of the monsoon precipice, craned forward cackling greedily, and just when one held one's breath before that first pelt of blackened rain, they slunk back saucily to slouch in the atomic heat. And the days? Ah the days, they stuck their thunderous tongues out as school kids made ready for the new school year, promised relief, withdrew that promise time and again and then, as the day darkened, purged wrathfully on the feast of St. Anthony...

When Lydia opened her eyes it was already the day of Patrick's arrival.

While the beginning of my novel changed in a linear fashion (the examples I gave above changed from one year to the next), I found it useful to think of the evolution of my habitus as being like that of a rhizome, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) famous term, each influence feeding off while at the same time enriching the other in a totally non-linear way. For example, when I read Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, I was completely entranced by the magic realism and the localized references to my own hometown, Bombay. In his book of essays *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie writes:

As Richard White found out long ago in America, black and white descriptions of society are no longer compatible. Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with these problems. It offers a way of echoing in the form of our work the issues faced by all of us: how to build a new, "modern" world out of an old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which we have brought into the heart of a newer one. ... This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of 'whole sight'. (1992: 12,19)

And before long the tentacles of magic realism crept unnoticed into my work. I wrote in December 2002:

It was a time for taking stock. The world was getting smaller and cooler and more rapacious. It was already December and Felcie was still sleeping. Her skin, a rat bag of memories, once taut, and tart and tempting, once brown, was slowly losing its colour and its constancy. It was losing its aim, its goal, its purpose. It was, in fact, becoming transparent. Lydia couldn't believe it, and Patrick couldn't believe it. Joaquim and Anne rubbed their eyes routinely. Ella and Melanie held up their

grandmother's hand, like a sheet of glass, and tried to make faces at each other through it. Maria Goretti De Penha told the Christian Mothers Sodality all about it.

This bit about a character becoming transparent didn't really fit in with the rest of the novel, with its quite realistic tone. I soon realised I had a case of what the author Pankaj Mishra calls 'Rushdie-itis' and rewrote this section in a way that was more socially realistic.

Some time later I read an article in the journal *Race and Class*, entitled 'Indo-Anglian fiction: the new Orientalism' by Anis Shivani. In it he observes:

The recent over-enthusiastic reception in the West, particularly in America, of Indian novels in English is a good example of Orientalism functioning in a more surreptitious form than its earlier blatant manifestations.[2] These are soothing, comforting, non-disturbing novels; in effect, they violate the integrity of the novel and bring to the Western reader apparent news or reportage that is no more than recycled stereotypes about East and West familiar from popular culture. American conglomerate publishing interests seem to be finding a ready supply of Indian novels in English that enact the commodification of exoticised Orientalism in global capitalist exchange ... It would seem from reading these books that Indians have nothing better to do than eat hot food, daydream about Bollywood heroes and heroines and mouth popular songs and, with what little time is left over, engage in insistently self-conscious spiritual examination, suspiciously akin to the rampant Californian New Age stereotype of such trans-religious seeking. (2006: 1)

It is significant to note here that reading a piece of literary criticism such as the above was a relief for me because I felt that my work was not and should not be the sort of exotic orientalism with which Shivani takes issue. My work has very little hot food in it, has no Bollywood in it and is set among the Catholic community in Bombay - Catholicism being the least exoticised of India's religions. In fact, at one UTS workshop a fellow student returned my work and in no uncertain terms corrected the grammar and syntax of my carefully reconstructed Bombay argot, and told me that there was no Christianity in India and what was I thinking when I decided to have characters with Western names going to, of all things, Sunday Mass?

Apart from resisting the pressure of fellow writing students to write in particular ways, writers often have to resist their own habitual practice. Chan et al make this point in relation to painting:

The famous Australian artist Sidney Nolan explained his constant change of mediums as a way of 'fighting against' the bodily hexis of a master painter: "It's very important - to me, anyway - to change, especially as one gets older and masters the technicalities of painting. You see, even the muscles learn tricks. It's like an actor; the gestures become habitual and he walks through the lines. Well, in the same way, the muscles learn through the movements that go on with a painter, until finally he learns and his arms learn, more or less, to produce a certain thing. It's like a trick shot in billiards or tennis. Yes, you must fight against it because I suppose if a painting is worth anything it is supposed to come from some place inside

yourself that you cannot get through any other means". (Barber in Chan et al 2003: 324)

To translate this to creative writing practice, writers have continuously to fight against any automatic tendency, be it the use of clichéd metaphors or overly exoticised characters or, for that matter, realistic characters who suddenly grow transparent in the vein of a magic realistic novel. While Sidney Nolan felt the need to fight against the bodily hexis of a master painter, as a writer I have felt the need to fight against my literary / intellectual / mental hexis by, for example, trying out a new voice, writing in the third person instead of the first person, as illustrated earlier.

Conclusion

The making of a creative writer is a social process often limited by the constraints and conventions of the literary field. Students develop a 'feel for the game' by investing their time and energy in pursuing cultural and symbolic capital, and practising the craft of writing. My experience has demonstrated that creative writing as a practice is constituted by the many players in the field of literary production; a new writer learns the craft by interacting with other players to acquire the habitus necessary for entering this field. I have described how these forces have partly shaped my selection of ideas and words, my creation of sentences, characters and plot, and my process of editing and rewriting. To paraphrase Danto, to be a writer is 'to occupy a position in the field ... which means that one is objectively related to the positions of' critics, publishers, editors, agents, etc. 'It is the field which "creates the creators" who internalize what is possible in reference to the other positions' (Danto 1999: 216).

Notes

1 This paper is a product of collaboration between a writer (Gonsalves) and a sociologist (Chan). It draws on the personal experience of Gonsalves as she moved from being a student of creative writing to an author of a nearly finished manuscript. The paper is presented in the first person as Gonsalves describes her journey of learning to be a writer and the processes of her writing practice. Chan's voice is heard between the lines as the authors both try to make sense of Gonsalves' creative process. The authors would like to thank the comments of two anonymous reviewers on an earlier version of this paper; they appreciate especially the generosity of the first reviewer in explaining a subtle point of interpretation missed in the original paper. return to text

2 He is referring to the recent novels of Pankaj Mishra, Amit Chaudhari and Manil Suri. return to text

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TEXT

Vol 12 No 1 April 2008

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

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