

## **TEXT Editorial**

### ***On politics, writing and research***

April is at an end as this issue of *TEXT* goes live, and in the national and world news are events that reflect some of the concerns raised by contributors to this issue. Several of the contributors discuss, explore and raise for consideration the problem of politics, and how it affects the ethical practice of writing. Tess Brady makes a powerful case for this, and effectively throws down a gauntlet to writers to follow up political and human rights concerns, and to publish what she calls 'papers critiquing much of what I was appalled by in conservative Australia'. Marcelle Freiman and Enza Gandolfo do precisely this, teasing out the complexities and perplexities not just of contemporary society, but of how a writer can take up the challenge of representation in writing, and of understanding their role as always, necessarily, political. Each points out, in their individual way, that since we live in history, we are always invested in it, stained by it, and never (as Freiman writes) 'free of a compromised position in the context of [our] writing praxis, even as one struggles to untangle oneself from history and attempts to clarify its meaning.'

This sort of engagement can never be straightforward. For instance, writers who focus on inequities and political violence can easily become (seen as, or actually) boring and tendentious; they are also, as Gandolfo points out, often tagged as just 'political' and hence 'less literary' than are other writers. It can take an effort of will and of courage to move outside the comfort zones of 'nice' middle class life and writing, and take on a different identity, one that looks critically at the self, at the nation, and at geopolitics; one that is prepared to critique not just statements by the Prime Minister, but the patterns of representation in your own work, the secret workings of your own mind. Such engagement is made even more difficult by what Brady terms 'a powerful thing' - distraction. With the best will in the world to do good, to take a stand, we are readily and frequently distracted from massive concerns (say, the invasion of Iraq) and more localised ones (say, the incarceration of asylum seekers). Distraction keeps us from focusing on issues even though we do care, even though we know they are critically important. Distraction keeps us from finding out about things that might discomfort us (and our potential readers). Distraction keeps us quiet. Ghassan Hage develops a similar notion in his extended work into the culture of worrying. For Hage, worrying 'has now become the dominant cultural form of expressing one's belonging to the nation' (Hage 2003), a form that precludes more general concerns about, say, international human rights abuses or the local institutionalising of exploitation. Worriers posit threats, and thus divert attention from the here and now to a feared 'other', a 'somewhere else', an 'outside', and distract us from more local and specific attentions. Hage's work attempts to find a way of resolving worry so that people can instead get on with being members of communities. Can writers contribute to this?

Possibly. Hopefully. Other articles in this issue of *TEXT* raise a variety of ethical, epistemological and technical approaches to the making of work, and the thinking that is involved in creative production. Like Brady, Jeremy Fisher seems motivated by a sort of cultural worrying - the economic situation of writers in contemporary Australia. His worrying is, though, the sort that Hage encourages because it does not distract him, but rather motivates him to do something ameliorative. Fisher calls on writers to extend our research into the business end of writing, to think more practically about our research, and to treat ourselves more like small businesses and less like artists starving in garrets. The (often alarming) statistics he lays out demonstrate vividly how much money is involved in writing, and how little of it returns to writers. This is a delicate issue for many writers and artists, because commercial success is still often treated as artistic failure - much as political activism is treated as insufficiently literary. Finding a path between each of these divides - art for art's sake vs engaged art; earning an income vs earning literary consecration - is likely to strengthen our field.

Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien, like Fisher, take a pragmatic position in their call for writers in the academy to engage in strategic research. Whether we like it or not, research dollars do count, and go a long way towards establishing the significance of a discipline in the eyes of university and public service administrators. Not everyone will want to take up Brady's challenge, and write politically; not everyone will want to take up Fisher's challenge, and begin to make a living from their writing; and not everyone will take up Webb and Brien's invitation, and begin a career as a funded researcher; nor is it appropriate that we all play in the same part of the sandbox. Nonetheless, as more of us do engage more actively, and more publicly, in any of these areas, the discipline of creative writing in the academy will be enriched.

The other articles in this issue, one way or another, explore these two paths of ethical engagement, and focused research. Laurie Duggan's recounting of the contexts of his growing up and the influences both on his becoming a poet, and the work he produced, double as an exemplar of a writer's close and ethical engagement with the world, and a sort of primer for writing. Like Duggan, Janine McVeagh mines her own experiences to explicate aspects of being a writer, and points to some very practical approaches to, and outcomes from, research. Her experience has involved her in some deeply complex issues of ethics and cross-cultural representation, and her account points to ways in which writers can tread delicately through and across such perplexing ground.

Since the last issue of *TEXT* there have been a number of developments in the specific world of publishing on writing. A number of edited collections are close to publication. Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll's *Creative Writing Studies: Research, Practice, Pedagogy* (Multilingual Matters) looks at creative writing practice, critical understanding, and creative writing pedagogy and research within the academy - from UK/Ireland, US and Australian perspectives. In Tess Brady and Nigel Krauth's *Creative Writing: Theory beyond practice* (Post Pressed) fifteen internationally-recognised writers, teachers and theorists address the absence of a theory of creative writing by identifying territories of practice where theory will build. Many subscribers to *TEXT* are also literary scholars, and the editor of *JASAL*, the Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, has asked us to inform readers that this journal is now online on the National Library of Australian website [www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal](http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal). The ongoing publication of

books on and about writing continues to be explored by our contributors: reviews this time include the first refereed review article published in *TEXT*, by AAWP president Dr Donna Lee Brien, which examines a flock of new books on the teaching of writing. Other reviews explore new poetry and essay collections, and the recent edition of the *Editing Handbook*.

Enjoy.

Jen Webb  
Nigel Krauth

## References

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