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Fiction Writing: Theft or Weft?

Abstract

What can a writer of fiction steal: a voice, a landscape, some history, a story, a name? Is barefaced best, ficto-critical more honest, slight of hand more deft? Good relationships and elaborate permissions have failed to protect the best of writers. Preparing for hostilities can warp a narrative.

Examining the heart of a dark obsessive story could lend to an exploration of the notion of heredity, but what if the story is historically anchored to a name, your name, or at least the name you took up with a man? Is it the weight of the exegesis bearing down, which demands of the writer such self-conscious examination of the inchoate novel, conceived but not transformed? This paper sets the rights and privacies of others, against the quirks of imagination, and the trust writers invest in themselves in order to create their work.

Introduction

When I visited Ireland in 1996, its arcane landscape moved me. I could feel a story stirring and it wasn't mine. Desire and transgression: where would one be without the other? Writers inevitably transgress, and I will too, but it is not the conscious object of my desire.

In 1493 a young man from Galway murdered his Spanish rival in love. Unwilling to compromise a local jury, his father, Magistrate James Lynch Fitzstephen, took his son to the gallows. Then after a period of depressive reflection he hanged himself from an upstairs window. Nothing is known of the girl.

It may well be an apocryphal story, and several versions survive. Reverend Groves published a version in Dublin, *The Warden of Galway* (1832), and this play was performed in the 1830s; in Australia Irish convict Edward Geoghegan borrowed from it for his play *The Hibernian Father*, which was first performed 6 May 1844 at Sydney's Royal Victoria Theatre, and he was accused of plagiarising from Groves. The voluble diasporic Irish theatregoers were not so much concerned with the appropriation of a Galway tale, as they were with the question of the play's authorship.

In 1852 Martin Lynch, his wife Mary and their three children, landed in Portland, Victoria. By cart and on horseback they crossed swamps and rivers into station-country west of the South Australian border, where they

ignored the lure of gold and, for fourteen years, disappeared from the public record. Despite the dearth of labour, it is not surprising that the writings of the wealthy English pastoralist who employed Martin, would fail to mention an indentured Irish horseman and his family. Frontier writings were literary constructions couched within a white hegemonic framework.

Martin Lynch and Magistrate James Fitzstephen Lynch, both from County Galway, share their name and perhaps some obsessive traits. My husband and our headstrong children descend from one of them at least.

In this paper, while foreshadowing the direction of my proposed novel set in colonial and postcolonial South Australia, I intend to defend my writing kleptomania. I have made the characters up, their Christian names, their points of view, their early-settler lives. Nonetheless they are Lynches, and I will use Geoghegan's play to link them, imaginatively at least, with James Fitzstephen Lynch.

I will argue that I am Dr Frankenstein: an amoral, foolhardy, stubborn, writer thinking only of my creation, and that writing a novel is not just abstraction, an intellectual exercise, but a process of construction. Until my monster blunders into the public gaze, anything is mine for the taking.

But there are querulous voices, conflicting histories, and disputed landscapes. I will try to locate myself, risk-taking writer, juggling too many balls, teetering on the edge of a precipice. And you will see me at every toss, wrong-footed, trying not to speak for or about beleaguered objects of history wars, constructing women, deconstructing men, searching for truth in hereditary darkness, 'telling lies about family' - prickly Lynch patriarchs may well say - 'using sleight of hand', whilst acting vague on tacit permissions.

I will defend these thefts, one by one: Geoghegan's play, the Lynches' name, blood and family, chronology and landscape, my self-conscious interest in the psyches of the colonised: Indigenous Boandik and Irish. And, as privileged white woman - with Protestant upbringing - I will make admissions.

I will conclude with my fears and some concessions.

Rationale for stealing the play

I want to write a book about resonance in families. It may turn Jungian. I believe it is important to speculate, especially in an imaginative way, about the traits that are carried by generations of families, in blood, by adaptation to the process of colonization or, mysteriously, atavistically.

Stealing James Lynch's story via Geoghegan's play will allow me to examine the idea of heredity in all its complexity, and at the same time provide me with a dramatic backdrop. I believe that the Galway characters in my novel should be familiar with this story, that its telling will be part of their communal or collective memory, or perhaps a confronting part of their history they may prefer to forget. It is a compelling vehicle for exploring the notion of ancestral grief.

Although *The Hibernian Father* is about a father and his son, and masculinity will be important, it is not just the lost boys I am searching

out, but their sisters. Stealing the play will bring a Lynch girl protagonist into the arms of an actor. It is a plot device that fits my time frame and allows the girl, who is culturally marooned, to examine her family through art.

Finding the play

The Hibernian Father was believed missing for almost a hundred years, until 1966, when academic Dr Albert B. Weiner unearthed it amongst other colonial plays in Sydney's Mitchell Library. In early New South Wales plays could only be performed with the express approval of the Colonial Secretary. Compliant theatres were issued with annual licenses. The Colonial Secretary's letters permitting a performance of the play can be found in the New South Wales State Archives. Geoghegan penned many plays in the 1840s, all of them performed at Sydney's Royal Victoria Theatre, and he first submitted *The Hibernian Father* as *The Irish Father*.

Weiner obtained a copy of Reverend Groves' play, *The Warden of Galway*, from the National Library of Ireland in Dublin, which allowed him to compare the two plays. He exonerates Geoghegan from the charge of plagiarism, concluding that: '*The Warden of Galway* is not a play at all, while *The Hibernian Father* has distinct possibilities' (Weiner 1966: 464). While critics were happy, then and now, to take issue with plagiarism, there has been no questioning the validity of two Protestant men, one a reverend, the other a convict, neither of them from Galway, writing the tragedy of the Catholic Magistrate.

Weiner is interested, as I am, in how the plays represent an historic drama about obsession, arguing that, 'if the play is to succeed we must sympathise with the son'. In *The Warden of Galway* the Lynch father is 'as cold-blooded a father and judge as Roderick is a murderer', while in *The Hibernian Father* the son's 'only crime is attempted murder... Geoghegan is sensitive to the father's dilemma and we pity him too' (Weiner 1966: 464). In both versions, and the Galway tale they are based on, we are presented with a father so highly principled he will kill his son.

According to Janette Pelosit, it is remarkable that copies of the play survive at all. Borrowing them back to make copies, and failing to return them, authors and actors lost many of those submitted. Pelosit explains that 'some colonial plays have only survived because the actors who had performed them retained a copy, or theatres kept collections of plays performed in them. However many theatres of that time burned down. 'Indeed,' she says, 'the Royal Victoria Theatre in Pitt Street Sydney was destroyed by fire in July 1880' (Pelosit 2003).

Shortly before Weiner's rediscovery of the play, Helen Oppenheim wrote a piece in *Australian Literary Studies* discussing Geoghegan, his body of work and some critical colonial reviews. Although unable to locate a copy of *The Hibernian Father* she is negative in her appraisal not only of it, but of Geoghegan's other plays, suggesting that they 'were bad plays but their very lack of dramatic quality, of originality of plot, characterization or language, makes them indistinguishable from innumerable contemporary plays which were acted on the English stage' (Oppenheim 1966).

The play may well be nineteenth-century Gothic melodrama, but it encapsulates the Magistrate's moral dilemma, and provides a welcome

departure from English plays of the period, in which Irish characters are commonly represented as criminals and peasants (Booth 1977).

Masculinity

In my novel an actor will bring his copy of the play to a Lynch girl's attention. She will find the Magistrate and his son, dark characters. Their combative nature will resonate with her. Whether or not great literature, the play will serve to drive my plot along, and illuminate the ethical tensions between Lynch men, particularly, fathers and their sons.

Playwright Edward Geoghagen was an opportunistic son. Helen Oppenheim notes that he 'was 27 years old when he arrived in Sydney on the convict ship "Middlesex" on 25 January 1840' (NSW Archives cited Oppenheim 1966: 283).

He was single, Protestant, and had been a medical student, when on 6 June 1839 he was convicted and deported for seven years at Dublin, the place of his birth. The charge? "Obtaining goods under false pretences"... The R.N. Surgeon Superintendent of the "Middlesex" strongly recommended Geoghagen to the notice of Governor Gipps and he was employed as a dispenser in the Medical Department. (Oppenheim 1966: 283)

Oppenheim claims that 'documents relating to Edward Geoghagen's early convict days as a dispenser at Cockatoo Island, which cost him his Ticket of Leave in 1843, make far livelier and more amusing reading than any of his plays' (Oppenheim 1966: 284). And that he was 'deeply involved' in a 'regular system of traffick...carried on between prisoners on the Island and persons in Sydney' whereby 'shoes and "elegant workboxes, very cheap" were manufactured at Cockatoo Island and smuggled out to a well known shopkeeper in town' (Oppenheim 1966: 283). Geoghagen's pass to Sydney was 'confiscated' and

Governor Gipps ordered the dispenser to be removed from his post and employed as a common labourer (but not in irons). Yet the shortage of medical personnel was such that a few weeks later he was back as dispenser at Cockatoo Island... Geoghegan had to serve his full seven years. (Oppenheim 1966: 284)

This redeployment allowed him to write prolifically.

The Hibernian Father, and the story on which it is based, will allow me to examine the loyalties of fathers and sons, not just to each other, but to the notion of family determination and survival. I am interested in academic Jennifer Rutherford's belief that the concept of law as a deterrent triggers the very behaviour in young men that it is supposed to protect us from. She refers to 'the lawlessness of colonial masculinity' (Rutherford 2000: 61). Confronted by authority, nineteenth-century Irish rebelliousness may have risen quickly to the surface.

Australians have idealised or at least offered grudging respect, to the larrikin, the bushranger, the reckless cattle rustler. After fruitless searches through church history, I stumbled over Martin Lynch and his son Patrick, in gaol records and local newspaper reports. They are both in trouble:

Patrick is resisting arrest, and Martin has the law bailed up with a pitchfork. I quote from the local newspaper:

Patrick replied that it would take a better man than witness to arrest him. Martin Lynch who stood by, pitchfork in hand, remarked that witness had better be off or he would pitchfork him off the place if he did not go: neither of the defendants laid hands upon the witness, who placed his hand upon Patrick at the time of the arrest which he threw off! Martin held up the pitchfork and witness believed had it not been for Mrs Lynch who was present, would have used it. (*Border Watch* 1867)

'The fantasy of Australia as the site of a lawless freedom translates into and camouflages a law of accelerating compression,' says Rutherford (Rutherford 2000: 73). Administration of British law may have been prejudicial to assertive Irish men, battling to make their way in a new colony. Rutherford refers to Lacan's argument, 'that desire flares up only because there is the law, and the law of desire demands its transgression - because desire itself is always beyond this law, overflowing and surpassing the limit it enacts' (Lacan cited in Rutherford 2000: 59). With little provocation Irish descendents may exhibit the same abhorrence for over-regulation and intrusive government. I am interested in cultural bias, which might arise from gabby nineteenth-century Irish jousting with police or other law-enforcement agencies.

Martin Lynch, no doubt, would take umbrage at Lacan's fancy idea, and make a claim for justice. Without knowing the circumstances of the debt incurred, it is difficult to know where Patrick would stand. Judge James Fitzstephen Lynch would use the pitchfork to escort his son to gaol. 'Mrs Lynch stood by' tells its own story. Women's lives are shaped by the behaviour of their men. That women are overlooked in many colonial accounts is well attested, but Mrs Lynch is present: not speaking, but at least spared stereotypical depiction as Irish biddy, drunken and raucous in her filthy skillion. She takes, by her mere presence, a mediating role.

The name

So, now I have stolen the play and been distracted by Lynch men, let us move on to name. A name can be a sticking point. Without a Lynch character I can't hitch my wagon to the Magistrate of Galway or Geoghegan's play. If I steal the Lynch name, I have an ethical paradox. Lynch is as common in Ireland as Smith in England, or Nguyen in Vietnam. It is the name of my children, and in some way it is mine. I could use the name of my father and his father's father, or annex my mother's mother's father's name, but I refuse to feel an interloper, the ownership of names being a male construction, based on occupation and ownership of property.

A name is 'the symbol of organization regulating marriage,' says Rutherford. She quotes Lacan: 'The prohibition of incest is merely its subjective pivot' (Lacan cited in Rutherford 200: 67). And, 'The father, then, is more than his person, more than his characteristics as father and as man. He is primarily a name...' (Lacan cited in Rutherford 2000: 67). Women's names constrain and define them in a different way. There is no

identifier for the Mrs Lynch, who stood by and against her man. She is subsidiary.

Our Lynches, and just a three-letter pronoun can trigger a sense of trespass, came from East Galway. Present-day Lynches share a name with them and, confide some women who married in, may share some personality traits. I am kin enough to use the name, should not be marginalized by gender. I am their wife, their mother, their daughter by marriage. Belatedly relinquishing my father's name may leave me bedraggled between two family umbrellas. I have intuited some tacit permission. But to use the Lynch name, I may feel need to bring a warty kind of honour. Perhaps I will use a pen name; or is the very act of writing a betrayal? However subversive, writing is what writers do, and I will take my name and do it too.

Family and blood

I am bidding now for family, and indirectly, blood. Women can work with blood, for they have seen plenty of it, and there is a potent mix of it in their children. Women often keep the bloodlines, connect the dots; acknowledge the lineage and authority of others. I am making a case for using my children as a conduit into family. I am inextricably linked, to them at least, by blood.

Many writers anguish over their place in written work. In 'Brina Israel's Body', Terri-ann White interrogates herself over 'scrappy records' and her yearning to 'resuscitate a family line, a connection, that was never there' (White 1997). I am juggling the rights and privacies of this other family against the quirks of my imaginings. I want to hijack an historical Lynch family because it is a vehicle that will help me explore the notion of heredity, to see how Lynches looked then and how they might now, and because I see connections, a paradigm. Writers are storytellers. If the house they're breaking into is the issue, imagination is the key.

In the 1850s Ireland suffered troubled times: churches burnt down; records were deliberately destroyed; people were on the move. Lynch families did not record their history. Information gleaned from death, birth and marriage certificates, is scant. The keeper of Lynch family history - my mother-in-law and not a Lynch - has several photographs of the Lynch men, on horseback and standing on the decks of boats. I have found traces of those Lynches racing horses, wielding pitchforks and in gaol. There has been unsubstantiated talk of borrowing cattle. Some family members will be bemused. They may not take kindly to me linking *our* family with a medieval tale of obsessive bloody-mindedness.

Writing family history is always fraught and not my aim. Elderly resources can die on you, or go nutty: 'Memory is for enjoyment, not for service,' one reminds me.

I am interested in the mythic and literary antecedents which might affect the conscious and unconscious view of my characters. And I am interested in the political, economic and social reasons why a family might leave their country, and how this impacts upon their psyche.

Lost girls

All that remains of 1850s Lynch women are their names. I have a feminist compulsion to paint histories for invisible women, to imagine lives for them. Implicit in the narrative of Magistrate James Lynch is a girl, who, innocent or not, watched two young men die, ostensibly over her honour. Whether a lover of the son, or only in his mind, it is doubtful that this nameless girl was pleased by so violent an assertion of possession. There is a gap in the collective imagination of this event.

Similarly, nineteenth-century Mary Lynch - set down, figuratively speaking, in a slab hut among the stringy barks, her clutch of children clinging to her skirts, her men riding to cattle and sheep a hundred miles away - must have a story. Perhaps a version will be told by an unreliable observer, her fragile younger son for instance, who sees her in new territory, where indigenous humans speak another language and are driven back with guns; where, more than likely, Mary battles alone against floods and fires at her back door, endures driving rain and searing heat, and encounters creatures stranger than fiction. Chinese men surprise her, trekking past her window on their way to the goldfields. And she may be afraid of dying alone, unnoticed, in the strange light at the bottom of the world.

In 'Fictional Fears and Guarded facts: An Experience in Writing a Ficto-Historical Novel', Maria Simms says, 'Through a postmodern playing with notions of truth and historicity I intended my novel to join others in the process of re-inscribing women into the narratives of history, particularly late nineteenth-century history' (Simms 2004). Many women have addressed this issue. I am no Irish orphan here.

In the 1850s several hundred so-called orphan Irish girls landed in South Australia (Jupp 1988, Haines 1998: 48), landed with nothing but desperate optimism to buoy them up. As a group, Irish women were diverse and adaptable. The large majority of them married, some to Irish-born men, many to others. One of them will take up residence in my novel. Marriage was the best way for nineteenth-century women to become socially mobile. But the Lynch girls escaped it - not even taking up their veils as brides of Christ. They may have been household drudges - or busy reading Catherine Helen Spence - or involved with social reformers: with Mrs Christina Smith trying to save the Boandik, for instance, or with writer Catherine Martin who began a school. No one knows.

I re-orient myself again and again. If I go chasing after Mary Lynch and her daughters, distorting history, creating it as women often do, from scraps and samples, exposing my connected family: just hubris, some of them will say. I will not be writing Mary - my character - being a figment of my imagination. Mary, no doubt felt some class distinction from the English pastoralist's wife, who, with her leisure and her letters, made Irish jokes, and entertained on a grand scale at the station house. Despite the gulf of property and manner, country and language, they may have turned to each other for a pat of butter or a bunch of spring flowers. They may have shared a remedy for colic or scarlettina - a hearth, doubtful. Welcome, or not, I am going in.

Chronology

I will also steal chronology; use it as a peephole; there's no sin in that. It is a good way to trap a cast of characters, fictional and real-life. I can blur

the lines, not use names of places, events, or people. Adam Lindsay Gordon is my poet, Father Julian Tennyson Woods my priest, and the Tantanoola Tiger a mere flash of colour in the shadows thrown by trees. Just as they did in the 1850s they can go about their business, moving through the landscape of my novel, as if they belong. If my characters labour under the weight of allegory, I will reconsider. Perhaps after several drafts of her *Book of Salt*, Monica Truong turned back, like Abraham, to name Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein.

Landscape

But I am not stealing landscape. My own nineteenth-century forebears also settled in the southeast of South Australia. I have lived there, visited there, even now have family there, but I am no longer local; nor are Lynches. My ancestral family-women came from Scotland, were Protestants, who settled their skirts on the same swampy land, and under the same relentless summer sky. Emboldened by some empathy and thoughts of our collective unconscious, I will leave my baggage - outside Lynchs' on the road - and go in. And fie to those 'Johnny come lately' locals, who try to warn me off.

This landscape may bring obligations. Attempting not to be discursive I shall position myself to ignore the squatter men and the Boandik hunters. I will say nothing about snorting truffling giant marsupials and the crawling annelids of the ancient seas. I do not need to travel back so far to dip my cap. The setting is just a backdrop, right, where I can juxtapose my characters. A novel is not an interpretive centre, a snapshot of a place and time. It is not about buttons and sound effects, but about creating a disturbance that will help me see and feel and understand - and hopefully a reader too.

Black voices: the dark psyches of the colonised

I will not speak for them in my novel. I hope not to speak about them. But nevertheless I will be accused of smoothing things out, reconstructing history in the gaps, or shouting over contradictory voices. Eva Sallis is firm on this:

There is no way to be a writer and be comfortable. Seeking authenticity and authority for imaginative work is destructive and leads to writers lying about their names and antecedents and generates an even more authenticity-conscious readership. Taken to its conclusion this trend is the death of fiction. (Sallis 1999)

Irish

I mull - hot whisky, cloves, brown sugar, Spanish lemon - the Irish psyche. If it exists, many generations carry the blackest genes. Familial traits are axiomatic. Predispositions are triggered. Deep in their bones, my children know things; things that their forefathers knew, things that I will never know. Over centuries the weight of such knowledge may bring my children low. It may come stronger in one child than in another. Some tensions activate in every generation. And immigrants bring their ghosts. It

is not entirely fanciful to imagine a past can transcend continents and seas, language and intermarriage. Extrapolating family traits from one century to another is not always scientific; it can be the work of fiction.

Some insist the English colonised the Irish: drove them off their land, stamped out their language, and starved their children in the name of civilization and resource management. Some say that after one of Western Europe's worst disasters, the English used American corn to stave the Irish up. Screeds have been written on the black psyches of the Irish, both in relation to the deeply troubled history of their homeland, and to their family dislocation, one million of them migrating to England, Australia and the Americas.

The Australian Irish diaspora disproportionately filled asylums, exhibited higher rates of psychiatric illness. In a longer paper it would be useful to examine the work of Irish-Australian scholars David Fitzpatrick, Pauline Rule, Oliver McDonagh and Patrick O'Farrell. Some historians argue that figures are skewed, that the Irish were harassed, stereotyped and persecuted by English colonists, who had consolidated power in the newly established settlements. Trevor McLaughlin says, that in Australia, 'over-representation of the Irish in gaols and asylums is well attested and for the most part, accepted' (McLaughlin 1996: 157). According to Mark Finnane, the Irish at home showed correspondingly high levels of incarceration (Finnane 1981). There are local factors, for example, the role of family in committal.

Historians, Robin Haines, Mark Finnane and David Fitzpatrick, caution against overplaying mental health statistics from Ireland or Australia. Sample groups in some studies were small. Young Irish women immigrants arrived with no parental supervision or restraint, and swelled the demographics (McLaughlin 1988 :144). There were many difficulties facing nineteenth-century women, particularly single women. In her studies of the nearby colony of Victoria, Pauline Rule outlines some of those difficulties including unwanted pregnancies, desertion, prejudice, the instability of spouse's employment, feeding growing families and conflict with the law (Rule 1998: 139). Many Irish women were geographically isolated and economically marginalized, without traditional church and community supports. This took a toll on mental health. Trouble resonated through the generations.

Boandik people

Like the nineteenth-century Lynches, I am blundering into Indigenous territory. The Boandik people were strong protagonists in the nineteenth-century settler-wars of southeast South Australia. According to local historian, Les Hill, in the late 1840s the Arthur Brothers from Mt Schank Station were driven out by Boandik people, and in 1854 the Leake Brothers of Glencoe Station erected 'Frontier House' - a 'large homestead with slits in the walls through which rifles could be used against any likely intruder' (Hill 1972: 26-9). In the 1850s Indigenous people were still in the majority on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula (Foster 2001).

I read Christina Smith's *The Boandik Tribe of South Australian Aborigines: A Sketch of their Habits, Customs, Legends and Language* (Smith 1880). Wearing my twenty-first-century hat, I endure Mrs Smith's devastating descriptions of her 'sable friends' and their high mortality rate.

On the one hand Christina is a product of Victorian imperialism and Christian to boot. On the other she writes with deep compassion, and makes warm, if unconventional relationships with the decimated Boandik.

With the assistance of her son Duncan, who later becomes an official interpreter for the local sub-protector of Aborigines, she faithfully records their language. Illness strikes down the Boandik people like flies. Christina presents a grim picture of a woman believing herself literally to be easing the dying pillow. She claims that this nation, which she refers to as tribe, is extinct by 1880, the publication year of her book.

I have Aboriginal colleagues, friends. Warm and generous as they are, I won't die wondering what they think. In 1850s southeastern South Australia Boandik people were shot at, marginalized and poisoned (Foster 2001). They are evidenced in newspapers, letters, on pay rolls, and in prison records. The Lynch men and women may have had everyday encounters. Asserting a terra nullius would be the worst kind of neocolonialism.

Sadly, some local historians claim there are no longer Boandik people, nor even any direct descendents. The onus lies with me to determine the veracity of this. Racist talk of the last 'full-bloods' dying out ignores descendents who have married into other Aboriginal groups, the Ngarrindjeri, for instance. Rendering the Boandik invisible, or failing to recognise them, may be as big a sin as misrepresenting them and their history.

What do Aboriginal people say?

'Have a go,' says indigenous lawyer and writer Larissa Behrendt, not in a derisory way, while at Flinders University launching *Home*, her semi-autobiographical novel. She quotes Fanon on 'home and country as a concept of belonging', and Martin Luther King, 'In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silences of our friends'. 'Having a go allows indigenous people to engage,' Behrendt says, 'and if the writer is having relationships with Aboriginal people it will make a truer piece of work' (Behrendt 2004).

In a 2002 *Southerly* Anita Heiss canvases the opinions of other Aboriginal writers. She cites Sandra Phillips:

For a non-Indigenous author to achieve a true feel for their representation on Indigenous subject matter and ... character...they would need to be very enculturated with Indigenous culture. (Phillips cited in Heiss 2002: 19 7)

And Melissa Lucashenko:

Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people? If it wasn't Aboriginal people themselves I suggest you go away and look at your own lives instead of ours. We are tired of being the freak show of Australian popular culture. (Lucashenko cited in Heiss 2002: 199)

All of this is sobering, daunting, a necessary wake-up call to writers. Being chastened may not be good enough. Indigenous people are

subsumed in a struggle for identity, self-determination, and their authority in discourse.

'In the past, "literature" about Indigenous women has been written overwhelmingly about us, not by, for and with us,' says Anne Marshall, reviewing *Talking Up to the White Women: Indigenous Women and Feminism* by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Marshall 2002: 188). 'Having a respect and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, history, social issues and what was happening to Aboriginal people in the era in which they are being written about is imperative to how one writes the Aboriginal characters and situations,' says indigenous writer Jackie Huggins, who has developed a checklist, in response to questions asked by non-Indigenous writers (Huggins cited in Heiss 2002: 197).

I am coming to the belief that I have rationalised too long. I need to give some ground, and not just land. Aboriginal history is oral, collaborative and hierarchical. Although interrupted by the incursions of white social policy it continues to be transferred by a complex set of protocols, permissions and traditions.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson is right, for my '...white middle-class woman's privilege is tied to colonisation and the dispossession of Indigenous people' (Moreton-Robinson 2000: xx). I should avert my gaze; ignore the testimony of the white hegemony. She says:

White Australia has come to "know" the "Indigenous woman" from the gaze of many, including the diaries of explorers, the photographs of philanthropists, the testimony of white state officials, the sexual bravado of white men and the ethnographies of anthropologists. In this textual landscape Indigenous women are objects who lack agency. (Moreton-Robinson 2000: 1)

It is my responsibility to talk to Boandik people.

I am writing a novel. The Boandik are a shadowy presence; they can't be overlooked. But perhaps the way to draw attention to their historic plight is through an Irish character, Rosanna: working for the white woman, forbidden to speak her language, the butt of racist jokes and impregnated by a white houseguest. Raised by others, her child has parentage that can't be spoken of. Rosanna's family have fled from land they are spiritually connected to; they take comfort in alcohol and isolation, and English pastoralists have the jump on them. There are obvious parallels.

In conclusion: what am I afraid of?

Being Given the Wrong Balls - Am I Writing Fiction, or What?

Deliberations on the nature of an exegesis, and its role in the development of research fiction, belongs in a different paper. I hope that my novel will, in an explicit way, explore the ways in which mid-nineteenth-century Irish diasporic history may collide with notions of authorial intent. Post-colonial theory and ideas about collective and ancestral memory will inform the mythic Galway characters I am investigating, as well as those I am constructing. Research and theory will force me to come to terms with appropriation in the broadest sense.

In *TEXT* October 99 Eva Sallis makes a case for research fiction being both valid and illuminative, that it 'expresses the outcomes of a body of research, and which is the culminating point of an investigation which could have been written up, at least in part, in academic prose' (Sallis 1999).

I am researching a novel. I can take the ficto-critical path and belt on the front door, or sneak my eccentric characters around the back to case the joint, but as diffident as I seem, once I go inside, the nineteenth century novel is already furnished. I must take a colonial chair, sit back, and trust the process.

I am reminded of Caroline Brothers' interview with the late Susan Sontag. Sontag says:

In fiction you can do justice to lots of points of view ...and if you are really a good writer you will honour the truth of each of these points of view... I feel I do more justice to the complexity of reality in fiction... (Sontag in Brothers 2004)

But literati, David Marr among them, have recently sunk their boots into fiction.

'There's so little enthusiasm within publishing houses for creating fiction and finding ways to sell it,' he says (Marr 2004)

'They say people don't buy it,' says literary agent Jenny Darling (Marr 2004) "'My view is there is a series of gatekeepers between the writer and the reader - and no-one is taking the punt any more'" (Darling quoted in Marr 2004). Perhaps publisher Michael Heywood is correct in his belief that there should be more Australian publishers, more books published, not less, and that we need our publishing culture to 'be very aggressive about publishing fiction' (Heywood 2005). The alignment of global publishing with other modes of cultural imperialism may demand a whole new tack.

Those of us who believe the writing journey has intrinsic value are nevertheless dependent on market drones, and may need to stick our fingers in our ears and hum, when we hear Lyn Tranter say, 'It's "tragic" that classes (CW) are "churning out people who are led to believe they are going to be published"' (Tranter quoted in Marr 2004).

Or Kathy Hunt, ostensibly reviewing two new books, who says, 'While a PhD in creative writing is almost a contradiction in terms, the idea that, by some alchemy, the rigours of an academic discipline can transform anyone into a writer stubbornly persists...' (Hunt 2004). Such statements ignore the fact that increasingly Australian writers are drawn to universities, in hope of succour: jobs, money, time, a quiet place, the fellowship of others; the only alternative government support being gaol. Literary fiction is not primarily linked with entertainment, and concerns itself with the deep exploration of ideas, the diversity of language. In some sense, it is redemptive. A University can provide the crucible.

Julienne van Loon submitted her PhD novel *Road Story* and won the 2004 *Australian/Vogel Award*. Judge Stella Clarke is resolutely positive. 'Doom-sayers be damned; the novel lives, indeed it jigs and capers. In Australia at least, its health is nigh on indecent' (Clarke 2004).

Having the balls snatched away

Jaysus, Mary, and Joseph, I'm not Irish, Catholic, Boandik, nor by birth a

Lynch. In her article, 'The Writer Who Mistook My Life For Novel', Caroline Baum says, 'The road to fiction is littered with the carcasses of relationships picked clean by writer-vultures' (Baum 2003). She relates the fracas that ensues after writers, no less than Kate Jennings, Thomas Keneally, Helen Garner and Jonathon Franzon, allow life and fiction to intersect.

'I write very close to life,' says Helen Garner. 'This is an ethical problem and it will never go away' (Baum 2003). If these are bad-weather alerts I am battenning down to write furiously before the storm breaks. Perhaps it will pass me by - with just a few theatrical flashes but no rain. Perhaps I can mend the roof before the relatives seek entry to my hovel, I mean novel. Invention, rather than revelation, may prove to be my only transgression.

Being jeered or booed before I'm ready

I am but twenty thousand words into my inchoate novel. It is conceived but not transformed. Characters inevitably grow and change. Set one against the other, they can make a lunge (yes, Dr Frankenstein), and sometimes move mysteriously beyond control. Writers set up an argument between themselves and imaginary critics, then in true dialectic fashion, synthesize the best and run with it, until the process begins again.

Too many balls: I will drop them all

I have an armload of the slippery things and I've thrown them up for you. I must not linger, crippled by nerves and indecision. But then, writers are a masochistic lot and in the end it makes no difference, for when they are ready, and mesmerized by the pictures in their heads, they will, albeit one eye on an imaginary audience, scrabble for the balls scattered at their feet, and begin to toss them gently. They can't wait.

As a writer friend of mine once said, 'It is like waiting for a lover'.

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