

## Editorial

### ***Interest in the exegesis: Background noise or ongoing debate?***

The exegesis is a hot topic at *TEXT*. A *Google* search for 'creative exegesis' has articles in *TEXT* coming up in the first few entries.

This issue of *TEXT* introduces a **Special Issue** on the exegesis - the best of the papers given at the University of Ballarat symposium *Illuminating the Exegesis*, held in March 2003. As part of the special issue, we have compiled a list of some **30 papers**, previously printed in *TEXT*, which deal with the exegesis and the associated debate about research in the creative arts.

Much has been written on the topic of the exegesis in creative writing programs, and a good deal of the international literature has been printed in *TEXT*. It is readily available. A scroll through the back issues will reveal all manner of twists and turns in the ongoing debate.

And yet *TEXT* still receives papers from supervisors and research higher degree students dealing in what by now can only be described as 'well-rehearsed statements'. They fall into two main categories. First there is 'the eureka statement': *I didn't want to do it, but now I see it's worth it*; or, from the supervisor new to the field: *I thought the exegesis was a cop-out mini theory paper, but now I see the relevance of its focus*. These are coupled with an equal number of submissions which might be called 'the tantrum papers'. They are characterized by sentences such as: *the act of creation is its own research - there isn't any need for an exegesis*; or, *I don't see the point and it's got a funny name*. Sadly we have all heard the jokes about the word 'exegesis' (exit-genius, exit-Jesus, etc) many times.

These submissions avoid the debate and instead contribute to the noise. Their statements are well-rehearsed but unfortunately not well-researched. They display a paucity of knowledge about the existing discussion. Oddly, they seem to be written from a point that ignores the basic research technique of - *As a first step, and before you make an uninformed statement, survey the field*. Often questioning or deriding the need for academic research, or even personal praxis research, at the same time they seek publication in a refereed academic journal. What lies behind this urge to put fingers to keyboards before researching the field? What is the cause of the strange desperation that grips the research student when newly confronted with the exegesis? Is it that this kind of exegetical writing - *the exegesis on the exegesis* - continues to be produced inevitably as more writing schools bring research higher degrees on stream and go through the process of developing from scratch their exegesis culture? But there is no longer any excuse for this kind of noise; the early stages of the debate are well over.

The exegesis, far from being new, sloppy in concept, or un-researched, now has its own developing history and rigor. It is no longer a scary, up-

start genre. Those who see it as such perhaps would be advised to relax into its mode and trace for themselves some of its historical antecedents.

Here's an interesting case in point. The Writing Program at Griffith University now devotes Week 4 of the foundation undergraduate course (Effective Writing) to the Exegesis. Within a month of starting university, students confront the concept of the exegesis - the writer (or visual artist, or musician, etc) writing about their own creative work.

These 'young' students cotton on straight away. They are already familiar with the exegesis. It is part of their everyday lives, their entertainment. They regularly spend time and pay money on the exegetical. Of course, they don't necessarily *realise* this until the lecturer says:

'Did any of you see the *Classic Albums* series on TV recently? You know, Metallica sitting around the mixing-desk telling about how they made the *Black Album*, and so on?'

Several put up their hands. 'I bought the series on DVD,' one student says.

'So you paid for a bunch of exegeses,' the lecturer smiles.

The student nods in a newly self-aware way.

'And have any of you watched a film on DVD with the soundtrack switched to the director's comments? Or the scriptwriter's comments?' the lecturer asks.

Many of them agree they have done this.

'So you are big fans of the exegesis.' The lecturer smiles again.

There's a lot of nodding going on now.

'And how many have turned on the Sunday afternoon interview programs where writers talk about their work? Or have been to a writers' festival where writers are talking?'

Well, a couple of shy hands go up.

'But you know the kind of thing I mean?'

They do.

'Those writers are involved in exegetical activity,' the lecturer says. 'And the people who watch and listen to all these forms - TV, DVD, live talks - are interested in the concept of the exegesis because it provides insight into creative work.' And the lecturer goes on to talk about historical origins, written forms of the exegesis in English literature, the current debate in academic writing programs, and how important all this is to a writing career these days.

It's so easy to introduce the idea early to students. At Griffith in the writing major students write short exegetical pieces to accompany folio submissions in their first year and, increasing in size, in second and third year. So what began almost ten years ago as a fearful exercise introduced at Honours level but still not comfortably dealt with in the early stages of research higher degree activity, has now filtered down through assessment in the undergraduate program to - as already said - the fourth week of the

academic career. There it follows hard on the heels of introductions to the academic essay and the personal essay.

Introduced thus, as falling into the territory around and between the notions of accuracy, authenticity and subjectivity/objectivity associated with various forms of the essay genre, the exegesis finds a site of understanding for students. For the lecturers, it is a valuable tool throughout undergraduate progress to test the thinking that writing students do about their processes and their products.

The Exegesis, like other forms of writing, is in a constant state of change. This change is assisted by the ongoing debate, the ongoing research into its form and purpose, and historical precedents.

Let the debate continue and the noise subside.

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