

Donna Lee Brien

Queensland University of Technology

The Problem of Where to Start: A Foundation Question for Creative Writing Higher Degree Candidates and Supervisors

Abstract

As both a completed (MA) and still pending (PhD) higher degree candidate as well as a supervisor of higher degrees, I note that even the most basic of decisions - such as where to start - can cause considerable anxiety for both student and supervisor.

Some Australian university course descriptions stress that the exegesis is "related to", "linked to" or "integrated with" the creative work, while others propose a more "reflective" role. Still others nominate that the exegesis will "describe", "elaborate", "elucidate", "examine" and/or "contextualise" the creative work, all of which suggest varying temporal relations between the two usual parts of the creative writing research degree.

A preliminary survey of a number of higher degree students and higher degree coordinators can help to tease out this temporal relationship and, hopefully, cast light on some of the perceived purposes, expectations and challenges of the research higher degree in the creative arts.

"The exegesis requirement ensured I was constantly aware that I was not 'just' writing a novel-but also engaged in academic work, which I was expected to be able to articulate, critique and comment on. The exegesis meant I was aware of Creative Writing as a discipline requiring a disciplined approach that would not be expected or required outside the university ... the reflective, critical articulation of ideas in *both* modes made for a challenging and rewarding experience."

"It is a side-show but a useful one."

"...a complete waste of time ... no one, including my supervisors, was able to explain to me what the point of the exegesis was"

[survey responses, 2003]

A survey of Australian university Creative Writing programs conducted by the Australian Association of Writing Programs in 1999-2000 lists some 20 programs with research Honours, 20 with research Masters and 12 with a

research PhD (1). Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests this total (of 52) can be significantly increased with a number of new degrees coming on stream since the data was last updated. This considerable number of postgraduate courses are, however, with only a few exceptions, relatively recent additions to the Academy, and some of these programs are still to produce their first graduates. This 'shock of the new' has opened up numerous opportunities for exciting innovation and invention, but also considerable space for uncertainty.

As both a completed (MA) and still pending (PhD) higher degree candidate, and a (past and current) supervisor of higher degree students, I would like to suggest that even the most basic of decisions - such as where to start - can cause considerable anxiety for both student and supervisor. I have, indeed, been asked for advice regarding basic work processes, and their timing, a number of times by commencing students, and this reinforces how many and how basic the questions which face the Creative Arts as a field of academic research and endeavour. Such questions on process thus seem a good place to begin investigation and discussion - if not to come up with any hard and fast and, perhaps, limiting answers and/or rulings.

The most cursory glance at Australian university postgraduate Creative Writing course information reveals that some describe the exegesis as "related to", "linked to" or "integrated with" the creative work, while others propose a more "reflective" role. Still others nominate that the exegesis will "describe", "elaborate", "elucidate", "examine" and/or "contextualise" the creative work. I believe these descriptions suggest varying temporal relations between the two usual parts of the Creative Writing research degree - the creative work and the exegesis (2).

While many of these descriptors follow the dictionary definition of an exegesis as "a critical explanation of a text" (3) and imply that the exegesis comes after (or at least is worked on adjacent to) the final drafts of the creative work, I found that I had, without consciously making a decision to, completed a first rough draft of my doctoral exegesis while finishing the research necessary for writing my creative project - a fictionalised biography. This meant that not only had I engaged in a significant amount of the theoretical, critical and genre-based reading necessary for my exegesis while I was completing the biographical and historical research for the creative project (and certainly before I began to draft the biography) but, in addition, I had notes, passages and even draft chapters written around the exegesis *before* I began to write my creative project. Interestingly, the exegetical component was not called an exegesis in any of the documentation I initially received from QUT, but was referred to as "a reflective component", "the supporting written material" and in other such terms.

As I wrote more and more of my own creative project, I developed, refined, edited and changed what I now think of as *the exegesis*, but at the time it always operated as a completely necessary *foundation* for the creative work. Reading and making draft notes towards the exegesis allowed me to work out my approach, methodology and, indeed, define and refine the genre I wanted to work in. One example of this was when I wanted to explore alternatives to the extensive footnotes (or endnotes) usual in biographies - I read on this subject, read examples of innovative alternatives and wrote a short chapter for my exegesis on this, long before I began implementing my chosen strategy in the biography.

In my personal situation (for which I am making no claim other than it was how I worked) I have thus always felt the exegetical component of my PhD to be absolutely foundational in the writing of my creative work and, therefore, an important and completely intrinsic part of the total project. I am, however, increasingly aware that many Creative Arts students feel the exegesis to be at best a necessary hoop to jump through and at worst, a waste of time - their creative work being *why they want to do* Honours, Masters or a PhD, while the exegesis is *what they have to do* to get their degree.

This difference has led me to wonder if my temporal approach affected my impression of the overall value of the exegesis. My own approach, starting with the 'theory', working out my genre, methodology and stylistic approach, and documenting this, seemed logical to me but as I spoke to other students, I realised this was a little unusual - not least because the dictionary definition that many students initially turn to clearly states that the exegesis comes *after* the work it comments upon, as an "explanation". The current QUT descriptions of our Master of Arts (Research) and PhD programs still note that "Depending on the discipline, the research component may be undertaken either as a research thesis ... or as a creative practice-based project with an exegesis *or written component*." (4) This idea of a "written component" as an alternative to the more temporally defined 'exegesis' is admittedly vague and unhelpful when trying to define what exactly is required, but perhaps it was specifically such vagueness that empowered me to feel free to start work on this part first.

The survey

Wanting to investigate this issue further, I conducted a small survey of a number of higher degree Creative Writing students regarding their work processes. The survey respondents had completed, or were near completing, degrees in Honours, Masters and PhD in Creative Writing at Australian universities, with creative work in fiction and non-fiction forms, although fiction - including poetry and screenplays - predominated. With only 10 respondents, this group obviously does not form any kind of representative sample, nor do the results supply any definitive or last word on this area. However, the responses do open up areas for discussion, providing a series of impressions of what some students are doing and suggesting areas for further investigation. And, although the number of respondents was not high, I do feel their individual responses are worthwhile to consider as the surveys were, I believe, thoughtfully completed, with most respondents adding significant material in the freeform comments areas of the survey. (Note: the total for responses below may add up to more than 100%, as students could supply more than one answer to most of the questions.)

To begin with, I asked a series of questions about the order in which students had completed parts of their higher degree. Except for one respondent, and this was for Honours, no one began to plan or write their exegesis before their creative work. Indeed, as I had suspected from anecdotal evidence, 90% of respondents completed later or final drafts of their creative work before they began their exegesis. The single exception to this planned and wrote drafts of both alongside each other, but then joined the 100% of respondents who completed the creative project before completing the exegesis.

How did you work on your research degree?

80%	I planned my creative work before I even thought about my exegesis
10%	I planned the two alongside each other
90%	I started to write my creative work before I began my exegesis
90%	I completed the first draft of my creative work before I began my exegesis
80%	I completed later drafts of my creative work before I began my exegesis
20%	I completed my final draft of my creative work before I began my exegesis

90%	I started the creative project first
100%	I finished the creative project first

10%	I started to write my exegesis before I began my creative work
10%	I wrote the first drafts of the two alongside each other
10%	I completed latter drafts of the two alongside each other
10%	I completed the final drafts of the two alongside each other

The overwhelming impression from this data is that most of these students planned, began and completed a significant amount of writing and redrafting of their creative project before beginning to work on their exegesis, and in many cases, before even considering their exegesis. To further explore this, I asked a series of questions about the reading students completed during, and for, their higher degree studies - also trying here to ascertain how *related* students felt the creative project and exegesis.

Your reading habits

20%	The reading and research for the exegesis influenced my creative project
60%	The reading and research for the creative project influenced my exegesis
70%	I have two quite distinct lists of readings for the creative project & exegesis

20%	I had one bibliography which I used for both creative project and exegesis
10%	There is some crossover between these lists

60%	Most of my reading was towards completing the exegesis
40%	My reading was fairly evenly split between the creative project and the exegesis

It is obvious from these answers that most students felt the creative project and exegesis to be quite separate endeavours. Only 20% of students felt the reading and research they completed for the exegesis influenced their creative project, and only 30% felt they had one bibliography, or even some crossover between their bibliographies. This is also revealing when considered alongside the finding that at least half of most students' reading was focused on completing the exegesis. This means that most of these students were starting on their exegesis and doing a great deal of reading around this new task, *after* they had completed, or were at the latter draft stages, of their creative work. This was, as I had thought, again completely different to my own approach, where I was using the exegesis (and the considerable reading and work involved) to shape and inform my creative project, as a developmental tool rather than a commentary.

To questions regarding the perceived value of the exegesis, responses revealed that students held very mixed, and sometimes contradictory, attitudes to the exegesis. One student, for instance, felt the exegesis was both "an integral part of the degree" but "useless".

Overall, the exegesis is

20%	worthwhile doing
10%	useful
40%	an integral part of the process / of the degree
20%	useless
30%	a waste of time
20%	just another hoop to jump through
60%	a sideshow to the creative project
20%	too long
20%	too brief

In the survey's open comments section, a number of respondents expressed confusion regarding the exegesis and its purpose, and this uncertainty may well have informed the negativity expressed above: "I was very confused about the role of the exegesis as were, it seemed, my supervisors" and "I was unsure of what exactly (beyond the numbers of words) was required in the exegesis." Some of these expressions of confusion, however, also included comments on the positive value of the exegesis, such as "... but I am glad I completed it" and "it allowed me to research material I had always wanted to research". A fascinating comment revealed how one student felt the exegesis substantiated their work as higher degree study/research:

Although, at times, I found it hard work and even, in the midst of confusion, had doubts about why I needed to write/research the exegesis, it was clear to me that without it I would have had trouble seeing the writing of my novel as a higher degree.

A similar response commented that the reading the student completed for their exegesis moved them into very academic/theoretical territory - reading that would not have been attempted without the prompting of the exegesis. Another comment in this vein was, "It is a side-show, but a useful one."

What I especially found of interest in these comments was that although there were a number of positive musings on the exegesis's value *in itself* as research, only one student mentioned that the exegesis was of any assistance in planning, conceptualizing, writing or completing their creative work. If I had filled in this question, I would have, conversely, probably put something like "I could not have completed my creative work without doing the work I did for the exegesis." On reflection, perhaps I could not have even started it in any meaningful way.

What the survey clearly reveals is that many students feel the exegesis (even if worthwhile *in itself*) to be a task they have to complete *separate to*, and with a considerable amount of research and reading, *after* they have invested (and exhausted) significant energies and their real enthusiasm in their creative project - the latter being what students think is the 'real work' of their research higher degree. Much of the "useless" or "sideshow" implications of the exegesis for these students may, therefore, be purely due to this temporal arrangement.

Perhaps advising students that the developmental work they do towards their creative work can form a key part of their exegesis could be a step in the right direction that supervisors could take? As could be promoting the exegesis as a task which is integral to, and worked on alongside, the creative work, rather than one which is addressed, and begun, after the creative work is completed. I now try to ensure that early meetings with students about research projects, consultations which usually address issues such as reading lists, methodological approaches and timelines, discuss the two parts (creative work and exegesis) holistically, as part of the same project that are conceived, worked on and completed simultaneously, rather than separately.

It will be informative to give these students the same survey when they are advanced in their programs and see how (and if) their responses vary from the above. Already, I feel less alienating confusion and anxiety from my students around the idea of the exegesis, however, this may reflect my own strivings, as a supervisor and student, to become more informed about the exegesis's role and potential. My discipline (Creative Writing) and my home faculty (Creative Industries at QUT) are also intensively involved in discussions around the exegesis, so this may also be having a calming and enlightening influence on us all.

The final product - another aspect of timing

Although I did not ask about this directly in the survey, it has also occurred to me on analysis of the responses, that one of the main problems Creative Writing students have with the exegesis is that they understand the result to be a piece of work which is not part of their professional portfolio. Unlike the novel, script, volume of poetry etc. they produce, and for which they can seek publication or other performance, such an understanding positions the exegesis as primarily a hurdle which is completed to fulfill the degree requirements.

This is despite significant opportunities for the publication of such work. Indeed, a total of 104 million books (produced by book publishers or businesses with "major book publishing activity" in Australia) were sold in the 2000-2001 financial year according to recent figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The 228 businesses involved sold

A\$1,250 million (m) of printed books - the majority of these in the areas of education (\$487 m) and non-fiction (\$432 m) - with fiction (\$180m) and children's books (\$151 m) representing a significantly smaller percentage of the total value. The vast majority of these books were sold to the domestic market (87% or \$1,098 m), while the remainder (13% or \$163m) were exported overseas, primarily to the USA (\$55m), New Zealand (\$27m) and the United Kingdom (\$23 m).(5) In terms of separate titles, there were 8,447 new Australian titles published during 2000-01 of which 7,392 (88%) were printed titles originated by Australian book publishers and other major contributors, and *the majority of these* (52% or 3,877) *were educational*.(6) Although I have no exact figures, there must also be many hundreds of thousands of journal, magazine, newspaper and other serial articles published here, let alone overseas, every year.

The point of these statistics is to acknowledge the potential for publication of the exegesis (either in whole or part), an outcome which students would surely see as worthwhile. Admittedly, the usual 10,000-30,000 word exegesis is not a standard monograph length, but it is definitely a fair start to one, or can certainly provide a series of book chapters and/or journal or other serial publications - the latter was indeed the case with some of my own exegesis. If one part of *the problem* of the exegesis is in how it is perceived as a finished product, then redirecting students understanding of this potential from the beginning of the supervisory process could be another part of the solution.

Notes

1. The AAWP guide to Australian and New Zealand University Writing Programs, 1999-2000, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/cwcourses.htm> [accessed 23/02/03] Return to paper.

2. University of Melbourne, "The written exegesis should describe the research process and elaborate, elucidate and contextualise the work." School of Creative Arts, Master of Creative Arts by Research, Guidelines for Supervision 2001, University of Melbourne http://www.sca.unimelb.edu.au/pgrad/mca_supervision.html [accessed 24/03/03]

RMIT, "This research degree, which is usually undertaken by project, is available to those with appropriate prior qualifications who wish to write creatively, developing an in-depth piece of creative writing, and reflecting on that work as a rigorous research activity in an accompanying text. Participants produce a substantial written project - for example, a novel, short story, or screenplay. This original work will be developed as a research project, and will be accompanied by an exegesis which reflects on the creative project and the research processes that produced it." MA by Research at RMIT <http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/> [accessed 24/02/03]

Edith Cowan University's description of PhD and Master of Arts in Writing describes the project as "a major creative project and a related theoretical/critical exegesis." In each, the exegesis, which accounts for approximately 20% of the marks for the project is described as taking "the form of an essay, or set of essays (15-30,000 words for the PhD and 5-10,000 words for the Masters) which may involve one or more of the following in relation to the writing project: relevant theoretical issues, its conceptual and/or cultural context; its aims and methods; its relation to other writers or writing within the genre; any other matter agreed upon with the Candidate's supervisor and appropriately approved." Edith Cowan University, Graduate School Handbook, 2000, <http://www.ecu.edu.au/GraduateSchool/publications/Handbook2002/> [accessed 24/02/03] Return to paper.

3. *The Australia Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 3rd Edition, 1997. Return to paper.

4. Postgraduate Degrees, Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology, <http://courses.qut.edu.au/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Courses.woa/wa/> [accessed 24/02/03] Return to paper.

5. Australian Bureau of Statistics, '1363.0 Over 100 million books sold in 2000-01', 2002, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Austats/> [accessed 26/02/03] Return to paper.

6. Of the 3,515 general-content titles, 44% were mass-marketed paperbacks, 39% were trade paperbacks and the remaining 18% were hardbacks.

Australian Bureau of Statistics, '1363.0 Book Publishers, Australia (2000-01)', 2002, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Austats/> [accessed 26/02/03] Return to paper.

References

Australian and New Zealand University Writing Programs, 1999-2000,

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/cwcourses.htm> [accessed 23/02/03]

Australian Bureau of Statistics, '1363.0 Over 100 million books sold in 2000-01', 2002,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/> [accessed 26/02/03]

Australian Bureau of Statistics, '1363.0 Book Publishers, Australia (2000-01)', 2002,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/>

Creative Industries Faculty, 'Postgraduate degrees', Queensland University of Technology,

<http://www.courses.qut.edu.au/> [accessed 24/02/03]

Edith Cowan University, *Graduate School Handbook*, 2000,

<http://www.ecu.edu.au/GraduateSchool/publications/Handbook2002/> [accessed 24/02/03]

RMIT, 'MA by research at RMIT', <http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/> [accessed 24/02/03]

School of Creative Arts, 'Master of Creative Arts by Research, Guidelines for Supervision 2001, University of Melbourne,

http://www.sca.unimelb.edu.au/pgrad/mca_supervision.html [accessed 24/02/03]

Donna Lee Brien is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane. She completed a fictionalised biography of the protagonists in the infamous late nineteenth century Dean poisoning case, as part of a PhD in Creative Writing. Her PhD exegesis was on the challenges of writing fictionalised biography. Her most recent books are The Girl's Guide to Real Estate: How To Enjoy Investing In Property, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2002 and The Girl's Guide to Work and Life: How To Create the Life You Want, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2004 (both co-authored with Tess Brady)

Debate

Jeri Kroll *The Role of the Examiner: Scholar, Reviewer, Critic, Judge, Mentor*

TEXT Special Issue

No 3 April 2004

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Julie Fletcher & Allan Mann

General Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@griffith.edu.au