

Southern Cross University

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A Short Person's Guide to Thesis Writing

It's twelve months since I began my PhD project. I'm still just finding my way; I'm not really in any position to be acting as guide for anyone. This paper is more a reflection on a year's worth of rambling and exploring. Other newcomers might recognise some of the crossroads and roundabouts I have found myself anxiously negotiating on the journey so far.

My mother always said 'good things come in small packages'. She said this to me when I complained about being short. I was a short child and I am a short adult. I knit beanies not jumpers. I make scones, not cakes. I write short stories. All this went unchallenged until I embarked on the greater voyage of the doctoral thesis.

I enjoyed my Honours year. An Honours writing student can present a collection of short stories and an exegesis. Each story its own small package of work, representing a short period of intense and exciting focus. The finished project a satisfying parcel of complementary short fictions.

'I'd like to see you write a novel now,' my supervisor said.

I like novels. I often read them quickly. But writing a novel would be nothing like writing a short story. I might first, I thought, have to re-gear some internal engine that seemed to have been designed for shorter projects. I went into my study to look for inspiration. The remnants of my Honours project lay in small piles on the floor and on the desk and in cardboard boxes behind the door and under the desk. I made a hundred decisions about what might be useful in the future and what I never ever wanted to read or think about again and I cleared some space.

I sat in my comfy chair and imagined writing a novel. Often when I had been writing short stories I thought that they might be seeds for a novel. Lots of writers use the short story to develop a scene from a greater, future work. I stood in front of my Australian bookshelf and looked for inspiration. Glenda Adams had her story 'Coral Dance' published in 1984. When I later read her novel *Dancing on Coral* (1987) I remembered the story and recognised it as a seed for the larger work. Elizabeth Jolley's character 'Weekly' made an appearance in a story 'Woman in a Lampshade' published in *Westerly* in 1980 before she came to take a central role in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1981).

I called a mental meeting of some of my own favourite characters. Would any of them like to be included in my novel? They stood reluctantly before me, arms crossed, eyes averted, feet shuffling. 'Not really,' they tried to break the news to me gently. They thought themselves happily retired. I tried to reason. 'A novel is bigger,' I said, 'much bigger than a short story.' 'Good things come in small packages,' the old lady based on my mother muttered. One or two characters agreed I might use their name or one of their characteristics, like a love of gardening. The fellow who had killed a cuckoo chick with a slingshot during my Honours year said he didn't mind if there was a confused father in this new much grander work. He curled his lip a little as he spoke and I noticed a side of him that I had never seen before. A woman called Bev, who collects photographs of people standing in front of the Big Banana, put herself forward as a potential major character, but I rejected her again. She slung her handbag around in frustration. A little boy, who in a past

story had built a model of his own world in a terrarium, suggested I use him again. I didn't have the heart to tell him that he had drowned.

Over the next few weeks I did some cosmetic surgery on some of the reluctant characters who had retired with Honours. I wrote some short, disconnected scenes that brought them together in various situations so they could begin to show me their new colours. I drove around northern New South Wales choosing places for them to live and I thought of all the best and worst things that might happen to them.

Some of the things that I have come to acknowledge as my abiding concerns began to emerge. There was a bewildered and unsettled father. There was a young woman changing identity and a child who thought about little things in a big world and big things in a little world. Landscape loomed large. Sugar cane grew and was burnt at harvest time, a wide river flowed with warm brown water.

I left some pieces for my supervisor to read. 'But where is this all leading?' she asked me. All my answers were short. I could think of lots of small dramas to put my characters through. I could imagine intense emotions and describe, briefly, their pain and anguish and jealousy and loneliness and alienation. But I couldn't see a beginning middle and end, no big picture, no long story, no protracted conflict seeking resolution, no novel.

I stacked some recent Australian fiction by my bed and I went to bed early and read and read. The novels that appealed to me most were the ones like Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998) which is full of short stories. Stories the characters told each other, stories that drew on myths, the princess in the castle, the hero overcoming odds to win her hand. And amongst these stories, even shorter stories about various species of eucalypts.

Michael Meehan's *The Salt of Broken Tears* (1999) was another novel where stories within stories added dimensions to the overriding structure. A young boy sets out on a quest and meets people along the way who tell him stories. Some of the stories have linking elements which help the boy on his conscious and subconscious journey.

I began to think that this technique might provide the re-gearing methodology that a short story writer, morphing into a novel writer, could adopt. I looked for some guidance from my shelf of theory books. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1988) provides a good account of how narrative levels work inside a text. She helped me to understand what role stories within stories might play in the structure of the text. And she introduced me to some unfamiliar terms. A hypodiegetic story, such as one that follows a character saying 'when I was a child...' might be told to advance the action, it might also help explain something about the character or the primary narrative. A story at this level often provides an analogy between the events being related and the story so far. The French term *mise en abyme* applies when the hypodiegetic story acts as a sort of textual mirror reflecting the diegetic (primary story) level.

For a short story writer like me, these terms and the concepts they represented were interesting new ideas to come to grips with. They seemed important if I was to adopt a story within story methodology. I made notes and muttered the new words as I watered the garden and hung washing on the line. Theory, I have discovered, remains just that, unless I use it as a tool when my own approach to writing, or reading, seems troubled.

Unfortunately something else happens when I replace the bedside novels with theory books. My characters drift back into the primordial soup from which they so recently emerged. They go on holiday. They become like string puppets hung on a wall for decoration. They collect cobwebs while I walk about thinking and speaking in that other language, 'theory', for a few weeks.

Last year, after a protracted period of nurturing theory at the expense of fiction I decided to write a capital P paper. Surely this was what postgrad students did. We are constantly reminded that research activity is important for the university. Since I consider identity with

the land to be one of my abiding concerns, (something that would always seep, without a formal invitation, into my work), I decided to write a paper on some aspect of Australian identity with the land. The paper consumed me for many weeks. I read volumes and wrote thousands of words that kept being cut back and rewritten. I changed direction a few times, jettisoning great chunks of well-researched and referenced text and adding sections that favoured my present thoughts. Friends asked me how it fitted in with my novel. I looked blank. 'What novel?'

Before an existential crisis engulfed me I visited the space where those once active characters now lay comatose and I tried to revive them. They opened their mouths and spoke. They had changed. A woman called Annie, who lived in a home unit advised her daughter, 'Increasing contact with your partner will both enhance and consolidate your deteriorating relationship.' I was shocked, no-one speaks like that. She was speaking in 'theory'. The old Annie might have said, 'Why don't you give him a call?' I wondered if this was an example of *mise en abyme*. Did my character's concern for a deteriorating relationship mirror my own neglect of my fictional characters? I was lost for words, short of breath, riddled with angst.

It is at times like this that I visit the video shop. Woman cannot live by reading and writing alone. The vast chasm between theory and fiction, left and right brain, had to be bridged. I threw a tablecloth over the computer, shut the study door and sat through a week of old movies. For the first few days I analysed them. I deconstructed as a feminist, an eco-feminist, a post-colonial subject, a lapsed Marxist in a post-modern late-capitalist society. I made subversive and negotiated readings, identifying extra, intra, homo, hetero and hypo diegetic narrative levels.

But Miss Marple is a dear and I was eventually lulled into a level of uncritical absorption. My cluttered brain was flooded with image after image. A steam train rushed over English countryside. 'Don't bother analysing this, just enjoy,' my subconscious said over and over again until the very concept of study seemed quite foreign.

The following week, I couldn't even remember how to spell angst and I didn't care. Wasn't Foucault a police inspector, the Pink Panther's sidekick? There was nothing blocking the clear flow of thoughts around my relaxed brain. The filters were clear. I thought I might have emptied the trashcan in the sure knowledge that all the valuable information was saved in my cerebral hard-drive.

It was time to take stock of my PhD project. My study was untidy with boxes of articles and overdue library books. I had resisted a filing cabinet but still hung onto piles of photocopied articles from my undergrad years and Honours research. I would like a secretary. If it had to be a filing cabinet and me the reluctant clerk then I wanted a lovely old wooden one, two drawers would do. I pushed the cardboard boxes further under my desk. I had two supervisors and another meeting with them approaching.

I had a collection of characters, none of them very strong or clear. There had been some interaction between them and I had plans for them. I had an academic paper which looked impressive although it seemed increasingly irrelevant and read like someone else's work. There was a lengthy annotated bibliography which continued to keep track of my reading. There were a few clear threads that traced the direction of the work. These were landscape, feminism, narratology, and comparative fiction. I saw them as threads that I might use to stitch together theory and my fiction when writing the exegesis. And I asked myself that question again: Where is all this leading?

I reread all my fiction pieces and tried to imagine the links that might make them into something more like the beginnings of a novel and less like a collection of short stories about a group of related characters. I noticed that the tone of my work varied depending on when the piece had been written. Flowery descriptions of landscape written on relaxing wine-soaked afternoons were interspersed with tense pieces - all short sharp sentences

written after some frenetic family activity. Humour popped its head up where it had not been heard before and the lone male character suffered terribly after I had argued with my partner.

I spent days running these slightly disjointed short pieces together and trying to smooth the connections so that it might read seamlessly. My fictional characters, aroused from their hibernation began to influence the direction of the work again. I worried over the male character Hugh, whose girlfriend was withdrawing. His mother kept telling me to go easy on him, that he would cheer up soon. The girlfriend's mother was less kind. She said that he was a useless no-hoper and suggested I leave some old rope lying around under his house for him to find. I sat still in my comfy chair, apparently worlds away, not showing any outward signs of working but playing very important 'what if' games inside my head.

By the time I next met with my supervisors I had a slightly clearer idea about the direction that my project was taking. We talked about stories within stories and family storytelling and mythmaking as forms of social control. I came away with a collection of articles by American feminist writers like Dale Bauer and Rebecca Bloom. Bauer, influenced by Bakhtin, suggested that I could use my characters to give voice to the social codes within society that I wanted to expose and challenge through my writing (Bauer 6). Although this notion wasn't new to me, reading about it at this time helped to direct me from the many distracting pathways that my mind was drawn to. It pulled me back into focus.

In the same manner, reading Rebecca Bloom's text *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation* (1998) guided me back to my own writing and made me look at where I was coming from and where I am going. Bloom suggests that when writing female characters, masking their anger, pain and other emotions only takes away their ability to actively narrate their own stories (Bloom 67). I thought about the weakness I had recognised in one or two of my women. I would let them be more gutsy, let them argue and cry. I felt a little ripple of excitement in the waiting room where characters hang out waiting for me to call on them again. Bev, the Big Banana lady, a character only ever destined for a short story, seemed agitated; she loomed over my poor mother who was still muttering something about small packages. The Honours characters, as thin as ghosts rested on the benches at the back of the room. And in the middle of the room, the newcomers talked and laughed and argued together vying for my attention. They were showing off.

I haven't completed the re-gearing process yet but it seems less daunting than it once did. My writing is now less about giving a small clear voice to some specific feeling or aspect of human nature. The cycles of my writing are less and less the intense periods of focus that produce complete pieces. There are more likely to be longer periods of theory reading: literary theory, cultural theory, narratology. This often leads to days of writing and revision when I am living with my characters and look glassy-eyed. There are times when I am absorbed in reading fiction and reviews of fiction. And there are cycles of absolute retreat from the whole business: video days that act as a sort of colonic irrigation of the brain.

I am still a short writer, but when people ask me what I write I don't say short stories any more. I am working on a novel, a PhD project, not a scone-sized piece but a veritable fruit cake. Not a beanie but a highly patterned jumper for a gorilla. I still ask myself, and am asked by others, where is all this leading? I am still hopeful of having the answer...shortly.

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Notes and Debates

Jeri Kroll *The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer*

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