IDEAS BEHIND THE WRITING OF THE CREATIVE NONFICTION NOVEL *STRANGE OBJECTS*

Gary Crew

By 1988 I had written two novels for teenagers. I was not especially proud of them and wanted to stretch my literary wings. Still, in spite of my personal dissatisfaction, they had done very well, so I was pleased when Heinemann asked for another. I agreed, but put to Heinemann that I would like to try something that came up out of history; something that might link to my doctorate on post-colonial fiction. I was focusing on a comparative study of the fiction of the Caribbean author Wilson Harris and the Australian Patrick White. (I never did finish it.) My publisher said 'Go right ahead,' so I did.

I made several decisions before starting. Since I was already known in the youth fiction field, I decided to stay with that audience and genre for the sake of sales and promotion. Having taught both ancient and modern history in high school, I knew that teenagers generally hated History and worse, knew virtually nothing about it. I was also familiar with what was known as 'fictionally reconstructed history' which in children's literature went right back to *The Children of the New Forest*. Even *I* hated this genre with all its terrible *quoth he's* and *saith she's* - not to mention its inherent didacticism and stilted costume-drama prose.

Wilson Harris had been experimenting with a blurring of the edges of character, time and place in his fiction (for example *Palace of the Peacock*) and these fantastical possibilities had intrigued me. I had also come across Kenneth McIntyre's amazing work, *The Secret Discovery of Australia*, and was interested in his radical ideas on the history of the continent. With this in mind, I quite deliberately set out to find an episode in Australian history that dealt with a teenager being isolated. I was eager to establish this 'teen loner' element as a form of rapport with my young readers, yet re-interpret the teen genre at the same time. As a result, I wrote in the journal that I had begun keeping for my new novel:

> *I would like to trace the life of a boy left entirely alone in Australia before settlement. I think this would be like leaving me alone on Mars. While there would be a drive for 'physical survival', there would also be a need for 'psychic survival' - how to adjust, cope, grow through loss…* [Personal Journal of *Strange Objects*. Entry dated 11/7/1988.]

I then went looking for my seminal historical episode involving a castaway youth.

In reading for my ill-fated PhD, I had noted several colonial accounts of children who survived shipwreck to live on unchartered shores until the arrival of 'rescuers'. Often they did not need 'rescuing' as the Indigenous people of the land had taken them in and virtually tribalised them. One such case had occurred following the wreck of the *Peruvian* in the Coral Sea in 1846. Passengers and crew drifted on a raft for 42 days before the survivors of this ordeal were cast up on the shore between modern day Townsville and Bowen. James Morrill, aged 16, was one who survived. James lived among Aborigines for 17 years before being found by the Jardine brothers, heading north with cattle. I was interested in the

possibility of using this story but hung back for some reason that I couldn't define. Maybe I made a big mistake. David Malouf used Morrill's story in his much acclaimed *Remembering Babylon*.

My next possibility was to develop the story of the fate of William D'Oyley and John Ireland of the *Charles Eaton*, wrecked in Torres Strait in August 1834. After a terrible massacre of the remainder of the passengers and crew, these two boys were spared by the Islanders and allowed to live among them. They were eventually found and returned to England.

Maybe it was this degree of historical finality - the 'happy ending' - that had warned me away from these possibilities. This could be, since the next account that I found really grabbed me. It had NO KNOWN ending. To me this was an author's dream.

The Dutch vessel *Batavia* had been wrecked off the Western Australian coast on 4th June 1629, whilst on her maiden voyage to Batavia, now Jakarta. Although the initial loss of life had been minimal, once the passengers and crew were settled on the God-forsaken Abrolhos Islands, they began to murder each other. Captain Pelsaert managed to get back to Batavia and return, 14 weeks later, to the wreck with a rescue yacht. He tried the murderers (over 120 of the marooned had been stabbed, bashed, raped, beheaded, drowned or strangled) and hanged most of the culprits, but decided to castaway two on the barren mainland coast of Australia.

It was the fate of these two that so intrigued me.

Wouter Loos was in his thirties but Jan Pelgrom was only seventeen. He was a mass murderer and probably a psychopath. Accounts of the trial detailing the men's crimes are fully documented and included as an appendix to H. Drake-Brockman's *Voyage to Disaster: The Batavia Mutiny*. Simply put, after their trial, this pair were dropped on the Western Australian coast with some trading goods - being Dutch, Pelseart hoped that they would trade with the local 'Indians' - and left to their own devices...and, of course, the devices of an author eager to write creative nonfiction.

Not only did I read everything that existed on the *Batavia* wreck, I also went to the Western Australian Maritime Museum to see what remained of it and its cargo and accoutrements. I decided to 'imagine' what Jan Pelgrom would have felt when he was cast away through the use of a (fictional) journal. The Dutch were great journal keepers so this was a reasonable assumption. In order to get into the murderer's mind, I also read all that I could find on the psyche of mass murderers and that dreadful condition known as *folie à deux*, or 'madness together', by which people engaged in mass suicide and/or mass murder. I therefore steeped myself in the life and trials of murderers such as the Moors murdeess, Myra Hindley, and the 1977 Jonestown massacre in Guiana. I was determined to make this piece of creative nonfiction as authentic as possible and added fictitious footnotes and references to 'verify' my sources.

Above all, I did not want this book to have a definitive ending. The fate of the two castaways has never been established and I wanted the creative text itself to be integral to, and verification of, this mystery. For this reason, I consciously wrote the novel as a composite or 'collage' of genres, as written history itself is a collage of genres.

The resulting novel, *Strange Objects*, is essentially audience-less (neither specifically for adults nor teenagers) and non-definitive in narrative structure/prevalent genre, being a combination of fact, fiction, reportage, journalese, personal and stream-of-consciousness (automatic) writing.

I think that I did the right thing. I certainly love the exciting possibilities of the creative nonfiction novel.

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Letters and Debate
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