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Research Fiction

In this paper I will look briefly at the definition of research fiction, the differences between research fiction and academic prose, and why we might choose the latter over the former in some circumstances. I will also explore some issues in cross-cultural writing in the context of research fiction; take a brief look at market and readership; and close with some observations about how we position ourselves as writers in relation to other cultures.

Research fiction requires some explanation. I am using the term to cover specific kinds of fiction. Almost all fiction involves some research and all research fiction will have substantial elements which come from experience and invention; or from diverse, essentially unresearched areas. Research fiction is not fiction which involves research simply to verify or authenticate certain details, characters and events. It is fiction which, to a significant degree, 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.

Several well known sub-genres of the novel fit this description. Certainly historical fiction is very frequently research fiction, typically where a writer has chosen fiction as a means to bring to life a historical character, event or period. Amin Maalouf's fiction fits this definition quite well but the examples are innumerable. The past, the traditional subject of research fiction is also one of our others. It takes a leap of the imagination and an expansion of self to bring it to life. It takes the reader away from the present to live vicariously in a different world, made compelling by its depth of research, realism and the capacity of the author as creator, as writer.

Another more or less well known area of research fiction is a form of fictionalised literary criticism which is not quite academic enough to be called ficto-criticism but certainly within range of it. It plays with interpretation and cerebral pleasures for the initiates. These are books which explore aspects of a literary work or theory through fiction: Martin Rowson's *The Waste Land* and Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare* are good examples. These are drawn from my reading but examples appear in any genre. Janette Turner Hospital's *Borderline* as an enactment and realisation of both theoretical and lived postmodernity could be seen as another example, since it is a creative work intensely conscious of exploiting literary and cultural theory and articulating a specific attitude or interpretation of it.

By the definition I am interested in, research fiction is not life stories, personal histories, autobiographical fiction or solely lived experience. It is also not imaginative fiction which has incidental recourse to research. Many contemporary ideas novels are research fiction: Antoni Jach's exploration of Paris, history and notions of civilisation, order and chaos in *Layers of the City*; and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* are examples.

There is, as I have suggested above, nothing new about research fiction. What is new is the position of the academy and the academic writer in contemporary writer training and writer becoming. I have used terms like 'realisation' and 'bringing to life'. To make living and to make real for the reader are concepts alien to academic prose. However, we are fast approaching a time in which the researcher will be aware, indeed trained to observe, that for some subjects making real for the reader is one of the options they have before them, and that fiction is one of several media through which their ideas can be communicated. In the past, although many scholars were also novelists, a basic separation between their activities and identities took place, in fact their creative writing was seen as exiled from their more serious academic life. Umberto Eco comfortably lived this double life. Fiction, the argument goes, is different from criticism, and fiction writers should keep their activity out of the serious world of interpretation.

Ficto-criticism and the dissolving of boundaries in the academy does not change the fact that criticism, creative as it is or can be, is different from fiction, critical and interpretive as it may be. They are perhaps as different as philosophy and poetry, for poetry can articulate philosophy, but not be it. The key concept is transformation and realisation: the realisation of idea in art. Distinctive of fiction which we term bad, which fails to please the contemporary reader, is the incomplete realisation or transformation of the ideas to which it gives voice: ideas are specimens, stillborn in didacticism, polemics or rant on the page, rather than living organically as themselves in action. The pressures on writers of research fiction are considerable, since paradoxically the idea itself has to be so transformed and realised that it is all but invisible.

Why write fiction to express research? Researchers are increasingly aware that academic prose has inherent weaknesses, pitfalls, and shortcomings, despite its strengths. Despite its independence, its stylistic integrity, its intellectual rigour, its harmonious patterning, academic prose is insufficient, unsatisfying for some subjects.

Academic prose is not monolithic, not an imperative, not truth-telling: it is, like any musical instrument, one tuned and specialised way of articulating, one exclusive artform; and in some instances it is disturbing and awkward, ringing false notes, or trying to play notes outside its range. Contemporary non-fiction writers are not unaware of this and experimentation is rife. Ficto-criticism experiments with the perimeter of academic writing but research fiction goes well beyond it.

The difference between ficto-criticism and research fiction is a matter of degree, emphasis and target readership: ficto-criticism has a critical purpose as its primary function and a specialist readership; and its fictional and imaginative elements should serve that purpose.

Research fiction will have a range of purposes from the didactic to the entertaining (as with all fiction) and its critical elements will be subordinate to its engagement with the emotions and the imagination of its readership. Fiction is essentially entertainment, even at its most intellectual. The separation of didacticism and entertainment perhaps arose because we associate entertainment and fiction with pleasure, we associate creativity with pleasure, as Kevin Brophy notes, while we associate critical reading, interpretation and study with effort, even pain. The academy has functioned in many ways to maintain a separation between the serious and painful; and the lighthearted and pleasurable: between criticism and creativity (Brophy 218-19). But this separation in terms of buildings and disciplinary divisions has little meaning, especially as the critical and the creative are so often united in the one person. The separation of entertainment and didacticism is Western and relatively recent. Other literatures are at ease with the sophisticated packaging of learning within creativity. Perhaps we have reached a point in Western literary history where the novel, that delightful, light, entertaining invention of imagination, is undergoing a profound reversal, a reintegration with the literatures which went before it. Perhaps not. Whatever it is that is happening right now between the academy and writers, between criticism and creativity, is new and startling. They are not one and the same, but they are inseparable.

If one of our choices in expressing the outcomes of research is fiction, what fields could it benefit, and what has it to offer writer and readership? Research fiction is uniquely suited to contentious issues: social, political and cultural. I am most interested in the cultural and particularly the cross-cultural possibilities.

The first feeling when writing other cultures in fiction is a loss of authority. Academic prose is above all authoritative, while fiction is subjective, acknowledged as the necessarily limited outlook of one individual and expressing their private capacities and incapacities for realisation or imaginary participation in something outside themselves.

At present, readers and critics of fiction question authenticity, the writer's right to speak, the bases of all expressions. The word will be anchored in part in the speaker, author will be accountable. This does not feel good and in part accounts for the relatively small amount of research fiction being written. But consider this: academic prose is no less tied to the limited point of view of that same speaker. It is not, however, entirely received as such. It is designed to have a transparent style which closets the reader with the subject matter and substantially erases the author as limited, subjective individual, replaced with author as authority. To see why this is so we have to look at the academic tradition and the establishment of a style which reflects the independence and the expertise of the outside observer. It is a truism that this is a legacy, for good or ill, of Western imperialism. In the imperial (empirical) paradigm, the scholar had to be unimpeachable, independent: only the outsider could be expert, and this is nowhere more obvious than when looking at comparative cultural, literary and sociological studies of the 19th and early 20th century.

Our inherited way of getting to know our others has been mediated through notions and styles of expertise which are increasingly embarrassing and outdated. Research has changed. On the simplest level booklearning is nowhere near enough: an individual needs to change him or herself in the course of researching.

Academic prose has adapted and changed, but for some subjects it cannot change enough. To put it simply, when writing about other cultures, the weaker, subjective position adopted in fiction owns the writer's limitations and preconceptions. It is more honest. And limitations will be glaring: real people will tell you if you have not brought their world to life in fiction, if you have not made them real to themselves.

Research fiction invites debate, criticism, controversy. It flows two ways: the writer has to be transformed in the process of making the book.

Writing one's cultural others demands more than bringing to life a period or personality in history: to bring a Vietnamese character to life, rather than being true to stereotype, takes more than setting and context. Correct trees, correct historicity, correct slang, language, all of these will do no more than create a character who is a composite of labels. Charlotte Jay's *Beat not the Bones* achieves this much.

The research we undertake in order to know context and history is itself fraught with the seductions of academic prose and the compelling illusion of objectivity. To realise our cultural others requires that we live behind the context and the slang and beyond ourselves: we must, even if only insofar as our imagination will permit us, become the observer from within.

This is somehow at odds with the whole nature and ancestry of academic prose but is increasingly commonplace in research practice and, on the level of lived experience, is much easier than the theorised cultural divisions and differences seem to suggest.

There was a guy, whose name I forget, which makes appropriating his story as parable easier. He was researching the poetry of the Yanyuwa people. After several years of intensive university research and language training he went to live with the people who were the object of his study. The first thing he found out was that he spoke women's language, and, having thus feminised himself, was the source of a great deal of amusement. Women befriended him first and he started life in the tribe learning the experiences of early childhood: he was linguistically, if not in body, a child. His understanding and participation in communal life came long before his research was acknowledged by those who were his object of study. Once the leaders of the community could be confident that his research would be of benefit to them, they allowed him to graduate, so to speak.

This is a case of the object shifting and becoming subject. 'Object of study', 'field of research' are both uncomfortable phrases in this scenario. These terms became people who had control of his personal wellbeing, his growth and the directions of his study; and who actively exerted that authority.

And yet this body of research will be expressed in a style completely at odds with his research practice and experience. No matter how cautiously he phrases it and how often he uses the first person, thereby marring his academic prose with his discomfort, it will be consumed in the academy and its subversive differences overlooked.

Academic prose is an art form: it is a gross error to forget this. Some academics learn to mimic it, but all good research writers will tell you that it is an intensely crafted and creative activity. For myself my academic writing has been my training, both in discipline and in developing imaginatively. My writing, fiction and non-fiction, grew from the skills and rigour of the academy. But it is in my own practice that I found the notion of research fiction compelling, and it was in response to my research that I was driven to write fiction.

In part my fervour for this whole idea comes from my own experience of it. I spent several years researching Arab culture and literature, exploring in particular the ways the *Arabian Nights* was appropriated into the Western canon and influenced, or helped codify, the ways the West perceived Arab culture and people, both in the academy and on a popular level. I studied Arabic language intensively and travelled over to the Middle East repeatedly. This research in all its facets was an exciting, enraging and life-altering experience; and some part of it was inarticulable in academic prose.

Alongside my critical work I invented a character who could carry the burden of everything I couldn't convey in academic prose. *Hiam* and *Sheherazade* grew side by side. To look at them now perhaps you could not tell. They are utterly different. *Hiam* is lyrical storytelling, set in Australia. *Sheherazade* is socio-literary criticism. Writing them side by side kept each free of the material and the style which belonged to the other. This worked for me. I don't know how to tell people how to go about writing research fiction but I am sure that the prerequisites exist within many of us.

Academic work achieves its effects, to invoke a tedious rule, by telling; fiction, by showing. T. S. Eliot talked about the presence of philosophy in poetry in terms of metamorphosis (162-3). I think this is what I am getting at. Heavy handed didactic theorising in fiction doesn't work: readers will tell you bluntly most of the time. But transformation, realisation: that is something different, both desired before it is experienced and seductive in the experiencing.

So what of the readership? Academic writing has its forum predominantly in the academy. It presents the illusion of objectivity, and it relies on the positioning of giver and receiver, of researcher and reader. The reader is not utterly powerless: readers will deride the unsuccessful, shut the books of the boring and shoot down in flames the inaccurate. However, readers will endorse the successful and the successful will be placed in the position of authority, of teacher. Only other authority figures or aspiring hopefuls will seriously, and usually respectfully, challenge or joust with that figure.

Research fiction by contrast has to mix with all other fiction. People will like it and dislike it according to personal taste and whether or not it touched them. Fiction is by nature egalitarian. Even revered authors, accorded a kind of hero status, participate more in a broad based dialogue, a lateral spread of opinion, than any academic writer ever will. The pinnacle of a reputation in fiction cannot silence the spread of response: I just don't like Carey, is perfectly sayable. Fiction is public property.

There are so many examples of bad cross-cultural research fiction that it is embarrassing. The Empire days gave rise to what is termed Orientalism for want of a better word. Orientalism was and is a system for the packaging of the other in recognisable parcels. Aladdin's turban and torso tux and the filmy and revealing clothes of the princess have a long history in the West, not the East. They are literary constructs: simple examples from a complex prepackaged set in the game of knowledge, a game passed from father to son from the mid 18th century to the present. To many, cross-cultural writing is severely tarnished by this game and at present we see the fallout: writers are uneasy dealing with subjects unless their personal experience will vest them with authority in the eyes of a reader and critic. Writing was too much a part of the machinery of colonisation and domination and writers are acutely discomforted by that.

But the worst thing a writer can do when writing imaginative fiction on contentious or painful subjects is to bow to the prevailing demand for authenticity, demote the authority of the explicitly imaginative and pretend to be more than a writer of imaginative fiction and a researcher making choices about communication.

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 a conclusion this trend is the death of fiction: we would only have life experiences, based on true stories and the illusion that people knew what they were talking about. Discomfort with lack of authenticity and lack of authority could easily dominate a readership which searches too rigidly for one's right to write.

The readership is much broader for a research based novel, even for a flop, than the readership of the same body of research in academia. My academic book (*Sheherazade through the Looking Glass: the Metamorphosis of the 1001 Nights*) has a print run of less than 10% of the print run for my novel *Hiam*. Both argue that Arabic stories, human stories are important and need reappraisal to recontextualise a trope 'Arab' within the more fluid and complex and unpredictable frame 'human': to reverse the processes of dehumanisation brought about by stereotype, but through one I reach many more people.

From a researcher's point of view, market and communication and the possibility of reaching a wide readership offer powerful incentives to try to communicate beyond the realm of specialists. For the fiction writer, research fiction is perhaps less appealing, for even the market for literary fiction is usually seen to be prohibitively small. The fiction writer might come to research fiction out of commitment to writing about contentious social issues, passion and the need to know and understand a subject. But research is hard to come at from the outside. The revival of research fiction is likely to be possible only with the support of the academy.

Good research will slow the production of a book considerably. It is a process of inner transformation before it can be an expressible finding. Research of the kind I am advocating will never be the simple acquisition of facts. It is a journey in itself.

The Yanyuwa scholar is perhaps a good example: he would never have been the same man he was before and could perhaps have written an important novel. To attain even moments of the ideal, *them* must become, even if it is only in the imagination, *us*.

Human beings have never done anything they have not imagined first.

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