

Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus

Tess Brady and Nicole Bourke

The Novelist Enters the Library

Nicole Bourke

The first time I went there I wanted to remember all the streets. I didn't want people to know I was a foreigner. I wanted my skin to be parchment, my tongue the spine of a book. I wanted to be pure and silent like the soft-soled librarian. I wanted to make love to the library.

I lie on the creased map of my bed. Each sheet, each cell of text piled up and spilling over onto table, chair, floor and dresser. They rustle together when I walk across the room. They whisper their encryptions to my bare feet. I crouch on the floor and spread them open, flat spinnakers. I tilt my head and listen. The papers shiver and fall silent.

We pitch over, slide across dry paper that rasps against our skin. The sharp tang of our body surges and breaks on the paper scaffold. She kisses me with her hollow mouth. Stirs formless syllables that migrate along her spine, across her belly. My heart, my sex, my body in her mouth. Between her teeth.

We speak a foreign tongue, we speak in tongues. I peel the words with a kiss and they fly like seeds from my lips. I burn her with my tongue. Ululate against her skin. Words spit up from the manuscript of her body, curl off her limbs. I lick them up and balance them against my teeth, swallow them whole.

We lie spooned and hollow in the torn room. I quietly peel pages from her sleeping skin. A shred of text lingers on her shoulder like a tattered wing. A paper angel. I crouch on the floor - my sharp knees pointed at the window - and riddle the scraps together; piece by piece, word by word, letter by letter.

Tess Brady

No amount of life in the rose garden will fully reveal to me the meaning of Hafiz's line: "The red rose is open and the nightingale is drunk." (Kritzeck 1964) To understand this, to enjoy it, or for that matter to create a similar line, I need to go beyond the actual experience of a rose garden.

"The rose? God, you ask the most complex questions. The rose would have to be the most loaded flower in the whole botanical catalogue. You know I have a recipe for Turkish delights, which begins: *first plant your roses* - those lovely deep red smelly ones." She was in a good mood and chatted away. Things must have been going well for her and Gabbett. "What on earth do you want to know about roses?"

"The symbol of the secret?"

"Ah, *sub rosa*."

"Exactly."

"How far do you want to go back? Knights Templar?"

I didn't know. "It's not my field, it's yours, just tell me about it."

She didn't say anything for a while and then she said, "I'm serious. We need to go to a ...", she hesitated knowing I would resist, "a rosery."

"Crete!"

"Meridian, some things are tactile." Her voice sounded a little hurt as if she was trying to give me the right advice but I was resisting it. She continued defending her suggestion. "You wouldn't expect to study art from a bunch of photographs would you? We need a garden, a rose garden."

"Do you have a particular rosery in mind or will any clump of plants do? I am, you know, familiar with what a rose looks like." I was cynical and let it show. And perhaps I was a little angry. I wanted to know something quite specific

but Crete in her usual fashion wanted to envelop me in a whole culture of knowledge. That was one of our great differences. I looked for facts which fitted together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, while Crete made large sweeping gestures, and let ideas float on the surface, as watercolours wash over the page. I checked myself. If I wanted to explore this connection between the rose and the phrase, perhaps it was only fitting that I did it Crete's way.

In the course of my teaching writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast, an Honours student who had not positioned herself as a writing student, came to see me with a problem. As a drama student she had set about writing an ethnographic piece of theatre. Her subject was one she felt deeply about, sexual assault, and she had arranged to interview the counsellors at a local sexual assault clinic, asking for their input. In turn the counsellors became excited by the idea of a play which, they thought, would help their cause, and agreed to tape various counselling sessions with the women who had been assaulted (all permissions and ethic clearances had been obtained). The student was to use these transcripts as the content of her drama.

Nicole Bourke

Writing seeks extremes, any extremes; beauty, awe, structure or lack thereof, enormous weight or lightness, expense or economy, detail, complexity, uniqueness - the ideals it can't always attain. It is a turning away from the realistic representation of a known reality. *But that reality must first be known*: its bones and tissue, the lump and foundation of it, the cell and sinew. You must first inhale it and breathe through it.

You must enter the library.

Tess Brady

The moment the student positioned herself as either a fellow victim/survivor of sexual assault, or a possible potential-victim/survivor, the distance intellectually and emotionally necessary for observation and collection of material, which is informed by an ethnographic methodology, closed. Unlike her colleagues who were working on emotionally safe issues, she could distance herself neither from the situation of the counsellors who were struggling to keep the centre open nor from the women who were survivors of sexual assault.

The student was coming to grips with the limitations of ethnography as a sole research method when generating a creative work.

Nicole Bourke

Imagine a city like Venice, a great labyrinth of beauty where each room, each wall, each window, has come adrift and they move about, sliding in a grand silent dance like stars and galaxies. Expanding and colliding, enveloping and being enveloped by each other. This is the architecture of a novel, of writing. When I close my eyes the world slips out of sight and what emerges, what I write about, is something else.

The result is like a photograph, or television; images of a life not really lived anywhere but arranged for viewing, for consumption. What I write is informed by research but it is not theory. Like a room full of photographs - I look at them pinned to the walls of my novel, the scaffolding, and barely recognise them. I know I sat at a table with them countless times, but I do not recognise them. I face these people, faces, theories and knowledges - and I feel I'm speaking against them, against memory, against facts and data and neatly annotated theories.

Tess Brady

The student had constructed from the women's words a powerful piece which dealt honestly and openly with the politics and emotional issues surrounding the Centre and its clientele.

Faced with their own language, their own expressions, which spoke about their frustration with the political, medical, and legal systems, the consellers were horrified by the honesty, and perhaps political naivete, of the piece. They insisted on such radical editing that the play was reduced to a doormat of a piece, designed to placate, rather than interrogate, the funding bodies.

Nicole Bourke

If only I could grab hold of what I mean. What they mean. Sometimes I feel I am holding it balanced on the palm of my hand - each crystal shard holding the other like Indra's Net. Sometimes it lies on the floor in fragments, breaking up the light. Each piece is necessary, though many are thrown away.

Working theory, and ideas, and imagination, and metaphors, and imagery, all that magical stuff into my work is like my mother's patched quilts - stitching together a whole from the imperceptible trace of one stitch, then another. The only thing is of course, that theory and research feel much less stable, much less real - like a thing of dust and moths which unravels and crumbles as you try to piece it together - each piece dissolving into the integrity of another.

Tess Brady

In my novel, the character Crete is right to talk about roses, we need to be among them; the feel, the colour, the perfume the entire sensual and tactile experience is part of the way we know about, and know of, roses. We need to go into a rose garden.

But there is more than this. We also need to enter the library.

I told no one. After school, just before my thirteenth birthday, I walked up the steps and made my way through to the foyer of a building which had fascinated me. I had seen people enter and leave it, and I knew that some public activity took place inside, but I had no idea of its purpose.

I remember feeling a mixture of fear and excitement as I climbed those stairs and approached the foyer. I was a child-woman, and as a child-woman I was about to enter knowledge.

I opened the foyer doors and stepped into the labyrinth.

The library was the length of a cathedral and not unlike one in proportions. In Gothic style the tall roof was arched in dark wood panelling and the walls were lined with the muted and dark tones of books. A series of stairwells and mezzanine floors led to more and more shelves, more and more levels. Browns, maroons, dark blues, greens and blacks seem to melt into the shadows and the wooden shelving, melt into the walls and the alcoves, creating a stilled atmosphere of the sacred. In both the ambience of the great hall, and within myself, there was a hush, as if I had accidentally entered a holy place.

I will never forget that first sight. Nothing had prepared me for it, nor would it again infect me with such awe. It wasn't just the number of books that impressed me, it was the library itself, the thing of a library, the idea or notion of a library. Until that moment I could imagine a bookshop, a pile of books, shelves of books, even a wall of books, but I had no idea, no notion that filled the category of library, no notion that conveyed the sacredness of the place, the way the books were housed with such reverence.

I had entered a great body, the mother of knowledge, the keeper of books, the protector of ideas, and I was overawed by her.

Standing at the entrance, the library created a deceptive impression of openness. I could easily see the various levels of mezzanine floors, the rows and rows of shelves stacked tightly with books. I could see the desks, the low lights, the librarians, the readers. It seemed exposed to me, almost naked. And yet as soon as I began to look at the books, I discovered the true nature of the labyrinth of libraries. I had no knowledge of how the books were ordered, shelved, catalogued. I did not know how knowledge had been divided into discrete areas, how we had ordered the canon, excluding and including, selecting, arranging and combining knowledge, banishing some ideas into esoterica or a hobby and inflating others into philosophy or religion. As a child-woman I had no knowledge of how one remedy could be categorised as scientific and another as superstition. I had no knowledge of the ordering of thought. The library was for me a great temple of books which might as well have been stored by size, or colour, as by any other system. I had no map by which to read the library and so I set to, familiarising myself, as I might in some new and foreign city.

Nicole Bourke

Still here - ploughing through all this knowledge with a great sieve. Last night I dreamt I was an old woman kneeling at the edge of a dark lake. The lake was full of facts, full of notes and ideas. I knew if I could scoop up enough water into my shoes I would be able to walk away and rest, but I couldn't do it because my shoes were old and thin with cracked soles out of which the water leaked. I was so tired. I wanted only to lie down and rest.

I grow tired, anxious, frustrated. I cannot find my way. All the diagrams and plans I made fall and crackle dryly at my feet. I push and pull at the tangled notions. I have built only this much; an armchair, a stone boat, a paint-spattered timber floor, a butterfly, a hollow-boned hologram who cackles and titters and glares as my mother never did.

I turn and turn and turn. I lose all sense of direction. I build a deep emerald green wall which forms a rim around the timber floor. It passes around us in a seamless one-sided surface. Absence flocks all around us.

I fall into dreams. Israfel paces, her sharp fingers gouging the floor. I wake and find her gone. I dream. When I wake again she stands beside me with hands on hips, her skin humming. "I brought someone to meet you," she says. No-one, nothing there, just a flickering knot of air that falls across the toes of her boots. "This," she announces, "is Catastrophe." I look harder, my eyes ache with the effort. Catastrophe breaks up the sky with a smile. Cracks the earth with a step. Catastrophe bowls along, a fleshless prima donna. Catastrophe rides the strings bareback and laughs - no, cackles and roars - as she goes. She is ad hoc and raw, intuitive tunnelling. The kind of breezy arrogant intuition Israfel has little truck with. Catastrophe falls into the room - her huge shine bulking at the sky - takes my hand and we run/fly/scream/trip. We bolt around corners, leap over logic and arrive breathless in the strange landscapes I don't believe exist. She makes connections I barely believe in. Grins when I want to give up. Go home. She breezes through information decks and topples discs into my arms. She picks up bright feathers and glistening wet stones. She remembers things like the colour of a wet sky and the smell of morning in the snow. She reminds me when I forget, that all those things are valuable; that they matter. That they will become the flesh and sinew of this illusion. She keeps me from taking myself too seriously.

I run along behind them. Shoes slapping the ground, hemline dropping. Running in a hurricane with a loose sheaf of paper, trying to pick up all the ticker tape that reels out behind them. I plunge into discs and retrieve as much as I can of Israfel's lists, keep notes on Catastrophe's dreams; remember her poems, her sharp smell. I gather all the scraps and banquets they leave in their flexing wake. I document and store and tuck them in at night. While they sleep I dust off their feathers and stones and stories. When, in the course of their wanderings they go too far, I take their appallingly similar hands in mine and lead them to safety. I put band-aids on Catastrophe's scratched knees, and rub ointment into Israfel's arthritic hands.

Tess Brady

The student knew she no longer had a performable work. In the situation where sexual assault clinics were fighting on the Gold Coast, as elsewhere, for their survival, she understood and sympathised with the alarm of the counsellors but felt somehow confused and bewildered by the whole experience. Why hadn't her experiment with ethnographic drama worked when her fellow students - who were dealing with motherhood issues such as school lunches, disabled access, brain damage victims' recovery and the like - produced performable pieces which were accepted, and in some cases lauded, by all concerned?

Nicole Bourke

I wrote something after class last night; concentrating on technique, keeping it under control. When I read it this morning I was unimpressed. It was too cautious. It reminded me of ballet exercises (*Battement*, *Plie Glisse*, *Arabesque*). All that technique - but no dancing.

Do not imagine that the exploration ends, that she has yielded all her mystery or that the map you hold cancels further discovery...when you see the land naked, look again (burn your maps, that is not what I mean)...I mean the moment when it seems most plain is the moment when you must begin again.

Tess Brady

In my novel my footnotes are both accurate and bogus. I make up ancient stories and myths as much as I use those which are well known and documented. I create whole scholarly journals and publishers as much as I quote carefully and meticulously from other writers. In one case I created a fifteenth century monk, Saint Beneface the Bold, who was the only person in history to be mistaken for his library. The explanation of this mistake is given in the same care and academic-ese of footnotes as are the references to Christine de Pizan and her account of the founding of Latin.

Nicole Bourke

Tired eyes, tired bones, tired tongue. The world, order, sitting heavily just out of reach. Nothing but thick shades of unfolded washing that daily sits and crushes itself into ever more persistent creases. Nothing at all. Nothing but chaos dancing on my grave in worn-out shoes.

Tess Brady

And the student with her ethnographic drama work? She needed to see that what she had was simply the footnotes for a play. Enter the library, read of other case studies, read perhaps some mythology, some poems, look at some art work or, taking another tack, get out the political manifestoes of the social change agents, look to the bible. Anything. The library has it all. High piled in wooden shelves or electronically organised, the library holds the metaphors and images the student needed in order to write a play that is both general and particular, a play that could politicise or move or inform the audience, making it that much harder for our economically driven politicians to close down sexual assault centres across the country, not just those in the Gold Coast.

Nicole Bourke

But in the long run, what escapes from between the lines of all this research are possibilities. They are what remain, what I'm searching for.

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