Australasian Association of Writing Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | textjournal.scholasticahq.com

Biography and biofiction: Seeking women's voices from nineteenth-century Australia

Elizabeth Chappell

To cite this article: Chappell, E. (2022). Biography and biofiction: Seeking women's voices from nineteenth-century Australia. In Kelly Gardiner and Catherine Padmore (Eds.) *TEXT Special Issue 66: Historical biofictions from Australian and New Zealand.* 1-17. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.36957

University of New England

Elizabeth Chappell

Biography and biofiction: Seeking women's voices from nineteenth-century Australia

Abstract:

From the mid twentieth century, second-wave feminism prompted interest from both historians and novelists in recovering the voices of women from the past. Where only sparse archival records were extant, a revised practice of biography was necessary, but differences arising from disciplinary approaches have led to debate on how this is best achieved. This essay analyses two contemporary publications that draw attention to lesser-known women's experiences in colonial Australia: Melissa Ashley's *The Birdman's Wife* (2016) and Kiera Lindsey's *The Convict's Daughter* (2016). Marketed as fiction and biography respectively, these two texts nonetheless use similar techniques to recover the voices of these women from the archives and to share their stories with broad audiences: Immersive research; imaginative interpretation of documented records; character development through dialogue, emotions, thoughts and sensory details; use of literary techniques of imagery and dramatisation as signposts of fictionality. Through these techniques, and despite their generic differences, Ashley and Lindsey's works evoke a powerful sense of their female subjects' experiences and inner lives.

Biographical note:

Elizabeth Chappell is a PhD candidate at the University of New England, Armidale. She has a special interest in reimagining life stories of women from Australia's colonial past. She is the author of two books: *Celebrate the Seasons: Garden Memoirs of New England* and *The Chappell Family History Album,* and a regular contributor to *Australian Garden History Journal* and *Land of the Beardies History House Bulletin*.

Keywords:

biographical fiction, fictive techniques, women's history, biofiction, Australian history

Introduction

Over recent decades, historians, biographers and novelists have attempted to recover lost voices of women from Australia's colonial past, and their approaches vary depending on the author's discipline. The attempts are located within broader (and often fraught) debates about the boundaries between history, biography and fiction, and indeed between traditional and more experimental forms of biography. These debates are longstanding, arising from disciplinary orientations within the academy, and are reflected both in scholarly texts and in writing practice. A key aspect of these debates is the extent to which authors can imagine or speculate about their subject's lives, especially where archival evidence is scant or contradictory.

In the context of these debates, this essay examines two examples of writing based on a common practice of using real people as protagonists and engaging fictive techniques and speculation to recover their stories, following Ina Schabert's (1990, p. 147) definition of "responsible imagination" as respecting the documentary evidence yet remaining free to interpret and select from it in order to develop empathy with characters and depict their lives more fully. Although the texts selected for analysis, Melissa Ashley's *The Birdman's Wife* (2016) and Kiera Lindsey's *The Convict's Daughter* (2016), are marketed under different publishers' classifications (fiction and biography respectively), they both use an array of similar techniques to recover the voices of women either overlooked in archival records, lost through the passage of time, or diminished by gender-biased recording of history: immersive research; imaginative interpretation of documented records; character development through dialogue, emotions, thoughts and sensory details; use of literary techniques of imagery and dramatisation. Close reading of these two texts highlights the power of fictive techniques to recapture past lives with verisimilitude.

Biographies and biofictions

The intersections of history, biography and fiction have been analysed by multiple scholars using a variety of approaches. Julia Novak (2017b, p. 6) outlines the ethical and disciplinary challenges posed by the proliferation of life writing genres and observes that "[n]arratologists and biography scholars alike have made repeated attempts to theorise the precise relation between fact and fiction in auto/biography". Hayden White (1966) has famously argued that historians and novelists engage the same techniques of narration and selectivity of material although their subject matter may differ. In their provocatively titled *Is History Fiction*?, Ann Curthoys and John Docker (2010) explore the duality of official and literary strands of historiography. Anna Haebich (2015, p. 5) points to archival absences, whether deliberate or accidental, as opportunities for imaginative interpretations and reconstructions of the past that are factually informed. Novak (2017b, p. 9) posits that the distinction between factual and fictional narratives has become increasingly blurred in the wake of such challenges, with implications for both the subjects of auto/biographical texts and their readers. Although most readers may understand biography as a factual, historical account of a person's life, Donna Lee Brien emphasises that all biography can be regarded as speculative because of the interpretative acts involved in its creation, and that it often acknowledges just one of many interpretations of

the subject's life (2015, p. 3). The description of "speculative biography" is generally applied when authors transparently discuss where they have employed imagination or conjecture to bridge gaps in the archival record (Brien, 2017, p. 15). However, as Brien and Kiera Lindsey explore in *Speculative Biography: Experiments, Opportunities and Provocations in Speculative Biography* (2022, p. 8), even when such speculation is implicit, it can be built on documentary evidence and thus enrich a factually based life narrative.

Brien uses the umbrella term of "creative non-fiction" to group life-writing forms such as "memoir, fictionalised biography, autobiography and other lifewriting … and various forms of experimental and narrative/dramatised history writing" (Brien, 2000), as well as others, explaining that this classification of texts enables a more effective way of discussing and publishing such experimental writing, as distinct from biography which is constrained by referential protocols (Brien, 2015, p. 3). In the title of one of her essays, she describes the broad genre of creative non-fiction writing as "the place where the real and imagined coincides' (Brien, 2000). Brien's mention of "fictionalised biography" (2000) leads to another related area of debate within this field – novels which draw very closely on the life of a real person. Practitioners and scholars have attempted, especially in the twenty-first century, to delineate the genre from traditional biography and define its relationship to the practice of historiography. Along with other scholars, Michael Lackey (2014, 2016a, 2016b and 2017), Jay Parini (2014, 2016, 2019), and Ina Schabert (1990) have endeavoured to establish boundaries, variously using the terms biofiction, biographical fiction, fictionalised biography or biographical novel, while Novak (2017a, 2017b) has cast a feminist perspective on the discussion. Here too definitions are much debated and at times the same term can mean different things. Lackey (2016a, p. 3), for example, defines biographical fiction or biofiction as: "Literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure". Elsewhere, Lackey describes the "biographical novel" as a work that "make[s] liberal use of the creative imagination and fictional techniques in picturing a person's life" (2017, p. 343). Ina Schabert (1990) uses the terms "biographical fiction" and "fictional biography" interchangeably, as noted by Lackey (2016, p. 4). Novak suggests that "biographical fiction – or 'biofiction' – is a narrative based on the life of an historical person, weaving biographical fact into what must otherwise be considered a novel" (2017b, p. 9), thus permitting speculative exploration of the subject's inner life. Like Brien, Novak groups biographical fiction under the broad genre of "life writing" which differs from traditional biography by exploring the relationship between fact and fiction and the nature of representing subjects in narrative (2017b, pp. 2-3).

Through imaginative incursions grounded in documented evidence, life stories can not only be reinstated but enriched with emotional and motivational detail. Parini highlights the capacity of the biographical novel to present an amplified version of history, based on speculation and imagination, which can offer a sense of the lived experience of the past:

> Biographical novels … take as their main character … actual people who lived in time and open outwards from that narrative, and while keeping to the agreed upon facts, nevertheless shine a flashlight into the darker corners of history and try to imagine what was really going on. (Parini, 2014, p. 206)

The difference between biographical fiction (or biofiction) and fictionalised biography appears to rest not only in the degree of fictionality of the work but the authorial intention. For some, fictionalised biographies are considered to take greater liberties than traditional biographies by adding plotlines, or inventing characters and events to enhance the narrative (Brien, 2015, p. 4). Schabert (1990, pp. 24, 67) draws a distinction between "imaginative treatment of the facts', which is the strength of biofiction, and "imagining the facts', which, when writing about real people, is like tampering with the evidence and thus breaches ethical boundaries. For Schabert, the label "fictional" confirms the necessity of imaginative licence taken in representing an actual life (1990, p. 4). She claims that contemporary fiction offers techniques for interpreting, explaining and understanding real individuals who lived in the past in order to portray a credible character (1990, p. 4). Schabert's explanation foregrounds the interpretative strength of the responsible use of fiction to illuminate a life story. Lackey, however, stresses that such works ought to be read as novels rather than biographies and that most authors of biofiction explicitly state that their works are novels (Lackey, 2016a, pp. 4-5). Novak challenges this separation, proposing that biographical and fictional narratives can be assessed under similar criteria (2017b, pp. 6-7). She also challenges Dorrit Cohn's (1990, p. 780) suggestion that the introduction of imagined or fictional elements "contaminate" a narrative, thus rendering it clearly a work of fiction. Rather, Novak suggests that works of biographical fiction along with other experimental life-writing genres can interrogate notions of "truth value" on a fact-fiction spectrum according to their narrative strategies (2017b, p. 6). Brien and Lindsey similarly invoke the concept of a spectrum to discuss degrees of overt or implied speculation in a narrative (2022, pp. 7, 8).

This concept of the "truth" offered through various approaches is a key aspect of the debate, raised in discussions of both biographies and biographical fictions. For John F. Keener, "facts are the raw material for biography but become biographical truth only through understanding" (2001, p. 199), proposing that the author's task is to provide a window into the life of the protagonist (p. 197). White claims that in historical writing "there is no such thing as a correct view of any object under study but there are many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation" and that explanations cannot be categorised as "literally truthful … or purely imaginary" (1966, p. 130). Some literary scholars and authors claim that works of biofiction deliver a different type of "truth". For Lackey: "Like the best historians, the most gifted biographical novelists are experts who give readers certain types of truths' (2017, p. 345). He considers biofictions as "truthful fictions', explaining that in order to satisfy a greater 'symbolic truth", biographical novelists frequently manipulate documented evidence (Lackey, 2014, p. 6).

Some authors suggest that their biographical narratives embellished by imagination can be more realistic than an account constrained by available documentation, such as Parini's *Benjamin's Crossing* (1997) on Walter Benjamin's escape from Nazi-occupied France or Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) on the Mirabel sisters' deaths in the Dominican Republic (Parini, 2014, p. 207, Alvarez, 2014, p. 29). Similarly, Thomas Keneally (1982, p. iv) and Patrick Mullins (2018, p. 93) discuss writing history and biography that uses the narrative devices of fiction, such as invented dialogue and imagery, to engage the reader in the manner of a novel while adhering to documented sources. This argument has also been suggested by

authors of historical fictions (Keener, 2001, p. 159; Price, 2012, p. 261). However, Lackey (2016, pp. 35, 46) sees an important difference: from his perspective, biofictions shift focus from historical events to foreground the role of the protagonist in shaping these events.

In discussing Schabert and Lackey's opposing opinions about biofiction's relationship to life writing and biography, Novak (2017b, p. 10) argues that demarcation between biofiction and biography overlooks their similarity of aims in recovering lives from the past. She quotes Keener's (2001, pp. 1, 157; Novak, 2017b, p. 11) proposition of regarding biographical and biofictional texts on a continuum rather than as binary non-fiction/fiction genres because both contribute to our collective memory and identity (Novak, 2017b, pp. 11-12). Novak concludes that biography and biofiction can be judged as undertaking "the same cultural work" and their texts both contribute to understanding of the subject's life: "Thus, no matter whether biographical novels should be read as fiction (and, thus, as non-referential), their biographical content clearly interests readers and is recognised as contributing to the subject's afterlife" (Novak, 2017b, pp. 11-12). Despite varied opinions about the forms and functions of biographies and biographical fictions, it is clear that both have the capacity to offer an understanding of, and emotional connection with, past lives.

Women written out of history

This connective capacity is particularly relevant to the retelling of women's lives where the documented record is sometimes sparse and influenced by gender roles of its time, and where women were largely absent from archival records written and preserved by men in power (Scaparo, 2005, p. 89). Brien, for example, notes the lack of biographies on women, particularly those who led "ordinary" lives (2017, p. 13). Elsewhere, she points out that "imaginative reconstruction is necessary" when the subject's archival record is fragmented or absent (Brien, 2015, p. 12). Novak attributes the development of female subjects in biofiction to increased interest from second-wave feminists of the mid-twentieth century in the lives of women in the past: contemporary female writers set out to restore women to the historical narrative by foregrounding their achievements, she explains (2017a, p. 223).

The synergy of archival research and creative imagination provides enhanced scope for recovering lives from the past. Fictive treatment of the lives of women missing from archival sources is justified by Susanna Scaparo: "In the absence of historical records, their stories – if they are to be told – have to be invented. The stories of the invisible, then, can only exist through fiction" (2005, p. 90). She describes the challenge of recovering of women's lives as at the intersection of fiction and history (Scaparo, 2005, p. xiii). This suggests that women's narratives, relying on non-traditional archival sources such as letters and diaries and frequently missing from the formal documentary record, are often more suited to interpretation by fictive means (Price, 2012, p. 260). Catherine Padmore describes this technique as "opening a space for the consideration of a woman's experiences lived on the margins of history … A woman who can no longer tell her own story" (2017). James Vicars writes of a similar approach, suggesting that forgotten or overlooked lives, where source material is limited, can be reimagined by fictional techniques as a means of recovering women's voices (2017a, p. 105).

Novak (2017a, p. 223) describes biographical novels about women and by women as the "authors' attempts to reach out across time to other … women whose lives speak to us today". However, she cautions against projecting twenty-first century feminist principles onto the stories of women from another time (p. 227). Padmore describes attempts to build empathetic "bridges into history for the reader" (Polack, 2014, p. 529, as cited in Padmore, 2017, para. 9), despite recognising that these are a projection of the author's own world: "Actual empathy, by definition is impossible … [A]ll we can hope for is an approximation [of empathy], filtered through the self". While acknowledging this challenge, I propose that both biographical and biofictional modes offer rich possibilities for creating a lived sense of women from the past.

Analysis of contemporary texts: *The Birdman's Wife*, Melissa Ashley and *The Convict's Daughter*, Kiera Lindsey

To understand how aspects of these debates might affect or be reflected in authors' practices, I will analyse two contemporary Australian publications from the commercial categories of fiction and biography, that each engage closely with the life of a nineteenth-century woman located in Australia.

Melissa Ashley's 2016 work *The Birdman's Wife* is classified and marketed by its publisher as fiction (Affirm Press), but it has been described by its author as a "fictional memoir" (Ashley, 2013). The published book, however, carries no disclaimer of its truthfulness. It is a first-person narrative of the life of Elizabeth Gould (1804-1841), based on extensive research into her diaries and letters and an interest in birdwatching shared by Ashley and her subject (Ashley, 2016, pp. 377-384). Ashley brings Elizabeth's life and her work as an illustrator and artist back into public view, evoking the years of Elizabeth's marriage to ornithologist John Gould, the couple's two-year voyage to Australia to collect and document native birdlife, and her vital but little-known involvement in her husband's publications (Australian Museum, 2022). An ornithological motif is carried through the narrative in language such as "my thoughts darted like swallows returning after winter" (2016, p. 24). Chapter headings named after bird species and the inclusion of Elizabeth Gould's sketches, featured (but scantly acknowledged) in her husband's publications, reinforce Elizabeth Gould's role in the scientific endeavour.

Kiera Lindsey's 2016 book, *The Convict's Daughter: The Scandal that Shocked a Colony*, was classified and marketed as a biography by its publisher (Allen & Unwin, n.d.). The work is an account of the elopement of Mary Ann Gill from her father's Sydney hotel in 1848 and her suitor's subsequent trial for abduction, set in the context of a colony developing its first stirrings of independence and defining its social mores. Lindsey accompanies the narrative with extensive chapter notes, a bibliography and index, following the conventions of traditional biography. However, Lindsey describes her writing process as "inherently speculative but also intrinsically imaginative" (2018, p. 5). She reflects that her narrative solutions developed as she became more immersed in her protagonist's "life world" (2022, p. 51). The narrative style used is strikingly different to traditional biography: Lindsey explains that she wanted to tell Mary Ann's story in a manner that was as "exciting as fiction" to illustrate the volatility of life for women from the emerging middle class in the nascent colony and give voice to some of the

more eccentric characters of the time (2016, p. 280). Brien cites *The Convict's Daughter* as an example of how biographers can "base their subjective conjecture, empathy and imaginings on the documented facts (and making clear where any conjecture is not thus grounded) … still ensure their texts are classified as non-fiction biographies' (2017, p. 21). Despite the publisher's classification as biography, its choice of cover image and design highlights the book's hybrid genre (Lindsey, 2022, p. 51) – a tension that demonstrates the complex genre dynamics of the endeavour. Reflecting this, *The Convict's Daughter* can be, and indeed was, more aligned with fiction by some reviewers. Sophie Barnes, in *Australian Book Review* (Barnes, 2016, p. 382), for instance, describes it as a "fictionalised history", and the review is listed under the category of fiction.

While the narrative treatment of the female protagonists is very different, these two works exhibit a strikingly similar approach towards writing the lesser-known lives of their female subjects. This begins with the texts' titles, which both define their subjects in relation to dominant men in their life: the birdman's wife and the convict's daughter. These writers do not shrink from recognising that imagination plays an important part in their narratives (Ashley, 2013, para. 25-26; Lindsey, 2016, p. 280). Rather, they defend its inclusion as a tool for presenting a more complete and authentic character (Ashley 2013, para. 31; Lindsey 2022, p. 46). Other key similarities include the use of immersive research and engagement with archival sources, speculation and projection, character development through dialogue, emotion, thoughts and sensory details, and the use of the literary techniques of imagery and dramatisation. In concert, these techniques establish a strong sense of the voices of these historical women, recovered from the archives.

Attempts to recover voice

The expressed objective of many writers of biofiction is to recover the "voice" of a person from the past. This refers to both the concept of "self" and the actual spoken or written expression of that subject, requiring, as Janet Burroway suggests: "an imaginative leap into the mind and diction of another person" (cited in Padmore, 2017). Padmore describes reading letters and diaries: "listening for their voices … for the flow of language and choice phrases that evoke a sense of time and place" (2017). While attempting to recover language structure from the past is fraught with difficulties in accuracy and authenticity, Brien gives examples where a credible voice created for an historical character has given both creative and historical traction to the narrative (2014, p. 8). For Scaparo, the ethical imperative is clear: "Their [women from the past] survival in the present depends on the voices their biographers *invent* for and through them" (2005, p. 162, original italics). The creative flexibility to recover (where traces of the subject's voice can be heard through their own writing or testimony) or imagine lost voices as if they are telling their own stories is perhaps the greatest strength of fictions based on lives from the past.

In fiction, unlike traditional biography or other non-fiction texts, the narrator can assume a separate voice to the author, or multiple voices to represent different points of view. Cohn identifies a clear distinction between the author and narrator as a signpost of fictionality, in

addition to the referential protocols of non-fiction (1990, p. 793). In a non-fiction text, the reader expects the narrator to be the author named on the cover, whereas the fictional narrator is a separate creation, sometimes a character within the novel and multiple narrators can be used to present different points of view (Cohn, 1990, pp. 792-794). Certain narrative positions can also create differing senses of how close or distant the chosen point of view is to the subject. Novak (2017a, p. 226) and Schabert (1990, p. 93) suggest that using a first-person narrator gives a sense of authenticity even when the material is fictitious. By electing to write Elizabeth Gould's story in the first-person, Ashley creates opportunities to reveal her subject's emotional life, her creative ambitions and her conflicting roles of artist and mother: "Until our baby's birth I had sketched for John with great passion and enthusiasm. But over the past few months, in my heart I"d made a connection between my artistic preoccupations and my son's lack of fitness for this world" (2016, p. 56). Here, details from extant documents provide a framework for Ashley to evoke Elizabeth's voice in fiction.

Lindsey employs the omniscient and very close third-person perspective in her biography of Mary Ann Gill, with frequent inclusion of free indirect speech. This gives rich opportunities to tell the story from the protagonist's point of view, for example, when Mary Ann is distressed at the reporting of her abduction trial in the press:

> "Thoughtless and giddy indeed." Mary Ann fumed as she slammed shut *The Atlas*. What would James make of the insults, she wondered, and the way his name had been all but destroyed? And what of her sixteenth birthday, due to occur a month to the day after their failed elopement and just as the Governor dissolved the Legislative Council in preparation for the forthcoming elections? Sure, her birthday would be forgotten and what with the great nonsense of the election Kinchela would also be left to rot in gaol. (2016, p. 116)

A mobile third-person point of view also allows the reader to access the thoughts and opinions of several other major and minor figures, all of whom have a documented presence in the events that form the narrative. Their interjections provide a vehicle for describing their own lives as well as the broader context of their times. Alvarez (2014, p. 31) suggests that competing versions of events can represent a more complete account: "Facts are only part of what really happened". This echoes Novak's concept of "truth value" used to evaluate the degree of imagination that determines the fictionality of a narrative (2017b, p. 7). Scaparo (2005, p. 124) similarly advocates for the use of two or more storylines to illuminate the unreliability of memory and complexity of real lives. In Lindsey's work, the imagined thoughts of other historical figures add depth and complexity to her depiction of colonial society and its shifting social strata. For instance, James Kinchela's brother muses:

> An emancipist pointing his pistols at a free settler's son and being acquitted of attempted murder? He snorted incredulously. Even more outrageous was the fact that this hotelier had actually been successful in his prosecution of a gentleman when the courts knew full well who had the better social standing. And all for a convict's daughter. He sniffed in disgust. (Lindsey, 2016, p. 146)

Both actions (snorting and sniffing) and thoughts are products of the author's imagination (Lindsey, 2016, p. 301). But court transcripts of two trials, firstly of Mary Ann's father Martin for firing his pistol at Mary Ann's suitor, James Kinchela, then of Kinchela for abduction, and the extensive press coverage these court cases generated, provide a documented framework for the narrative. Lindsey has acknowledged the challenge of recreating a life that is only partly documented, with archival material biased towards men of the upper social classes, detailing in her author notes where she has used imagination and conjecture (2016, p. 283-4).

The final three chapters of *The Convict's Daughter* display a different narrative voice, with frequent use of the qualifying signals of speculation, such as "probably" or "may have", and very little of the historical figures' emotions and thoughts. The author's presence is more strongly felt here, evident in the use of the first-person plural pronoun: "We do, however, know that Mary Ann Gill and James Butler Kinchela were married on Saturday 16 October 1852" (2016, p. 266). Lindsey acknowledges that "[t]he final chapters are written in a different style and do not involve imaginative incursions' because of the paucity of information on Mary Ann Gill's later life (2016, p. 305). It appears that after the court cases were over and Mary Ann no longer featured in the newspapers, documentation of her life was scant, thus prompting a more cautious approach to using speculation when writing her later years.

Immersive research

Both authors stress the importance of archival research as a foundation to their work and include extensive notes on their research and writing decisions in their books (Ashley, 2016, pp. 377-384; Lindsey, 2016, pp. 280-287). This is expected for biographers but is also common practice among writers of historical biofiction. Several novelists cited in this paper explain how immersion in the details of past lives enabled them to bond with their subjects. Padmore (2017, para. 7) describes feeling as though her biofictional character was walking beside her. This aligns with the experience of author Ariella Van Luyn, who holds an imaginary conversation with the "ghost" of her subject on the ethics of telling her story (2019, p. 68).

Ashley outlines her research journey in her author's note (2016, pp. 377-387). The archival research she undertook led her to speculate, after scrutinising the original artworks and accompanying correspondence, that it was Elizabeth Gould, and not her husband as is often supposed, who produced the acclaimed lithographs for *The Birds of Australia, 1840-1848* (Ashley, 2013, para. 10-12). Ashley further immersed herself in the life of her subject by volunteering as a taxidermist at the Queensland Museum (Ashley, 2013, para. 2). This immersive aspect of her research provides authenticity to her descriptions of preparing bird specimens and painting them:

> I cut and peeled, folding the skin back, wiping the fat on the rag. I found the joints of the wings and severed the tendons and ligaments, making it easier to work in behind the back and sides of the body. The meat came away easily in my hands, like preparing a chicken, and it was not long before I had separated the skin from around the torso and gut. (Ashley, 2016, p. 271)

Ashley recounts how she struggled to capture Elizabeth Gould's character until, after examining her original drawings, she felt a connection: "as I closed the album and handed it back to its librarian-guardian, I felt close to my subject" (2013, para. 15). Scaparo (2005, p. 18) and Brien (2015, p. 4) both highlight the role of works of art along with written sources as inspiration for recovering emotions and motivations. It was in viewing the precision of Gould's work that Ashley:

> began to really gather gems for characterising her as a point of view narrator … she had made extraordinary progress as a zoological artist. This, to me, speaks directly, where Elizabeth's diary and correspondence failed, of her passion, commitment and determination to succeed aesthetically. (2013)

This studied immersion in the life of another is a tool for portraying the emotions and thoughts of the subject.

Similarly, Lindsey's extensive bibliography for *The Convict's Daughter* is testament to her lengthy immersion in her subject (Vicars, 2017b, p. 197). "I realised I would need to become intimately acquainted with their everyday life if I was to gain any idea of how they thought and felt", Lindsey explains (2016, p. 281). She describes how she spent time in both England and Ireland, searching for not only archival evidence but also social background of Irish folklore and marriage customs which informed the behaviour of her characters (Lindsey, 2016, p. 283), such as this musing from the figure of Martin Gill:

> Over the years he had heard stories from home about men who had hanged for taking a wife without asking for her hand in the right way. There were quite a few too who had come on the boats lucky to avoid the swing for such a crime. After all it was just another form of property theft in the eyes of the law. (Lindsey, 2016, p. 73)

Lindsey's immersion in the lives and times of her characters shows not only in their thoughts and actions but also in the minutiae of their daily lives: their clothes, furnishings, food and behaviour. She writes of "the old silver tray Margaret had picked up on the cheap when she first married Gill" (p. 69), and that, "The girl's reading was now more fluent than his cumbersome attempts, which still had him pushing his finger along the page" (p. 111). As with Ashley's work, these small details help resurrect characters from the past and enliven archival evidence.

Sensory details

Careful reading of archival materials for indicators of personality, interpersonal encounters, health issues and preferences, for example, can uncover previously neglected evidence and enrich a biographic portrait. Schabert describes this process as recovering experiences of the past from the archive by reading with empathy (1990, p. 87). She emphasises the importance of the writer building a sense of physical reality of the subject by including sensory details and references to physiological aspects that enable the reader to identify at an emotional and physical level (1990, pp. 95-86).

The credibility of Elizabeth Gould's voice as narrator is reinforced by frequent descriptions of sensory experience, such as: "soil roughened my fingernails and there were twigs in my hair. I smelled my own perspiration" (Ashley, 2016, p. 247). After travelling across New South Wales by bullock dray: "I could not wait to sink into the tin tub. I leaned back against its sides, breathing in the scented salts that Mary had sprinkled into the water, lavender heads floating about my arms and legs' (p. 257). Elizabeth's physicality is amplified during her eight confinements and when she is close to death from puerperal fever. Ashley's detailed archival research anchors these scenes in their period with lists of pharmaceuticals and medical practices from the nineteenth century.

Lindsey describes Mary Ann Gill's life in colonial Sydney with realistic depiction of the times when streets were unsealed, sewerage and drainage were unthought of, and industry added to the pollution:

> She knew the stench of the Tank Stream in high summer and the way her clothes turned wet with sweat when she ran errands during the day. She knew the taste of the air – something like fetid fruit mixed with grit and the stench of nearby factories. Soap, candles and tanneries. The heavy sweetness of the hotel kitchen and how it had clung to her clothes for as long as she could remember. (2016, p. 248)

Several other evocative passages describe the unsanitary side of the city, alongside its sparkling harbour and handsome sandstone buildings. Lindsay explains that she has set out to capture the 'sounds and smells, textures and tastes' of the period (p. 281). This technique of imaginative recreation of setting enriches the narrative by including details not usually documented in historical records.

Projection

Novak describes works by feminist authors seeking to recover the lives of women from the past as communicating across time (2017a, p. 223). We can assume that twenty-first century biofictions about women reflect present-day values of the female role as much as historical attitudes, she suggests, and that the same argument can also be applied to traditional biographies (Novak, 2017a, p. 224). This tension is demonstrated in the representations of historical expectations about women's identities and social roles in the works studied. Ashley reflects social expectations of Elizabeth's time in the (imagined) conversations between her and her husband, but also extrapolates the twenty-first century conundrum of balancing career and family onto the life of Elizabeth Gould. Early in her marriage Elizabeth thinks: "What does it matter if I were the nest-bound hen, while John flared his pretty peacock's tail about Regent's Park?" (Ashley, 2016, p. 37). However, as her confidence and public image grows, she seeks greater recognition. Ashley conveys this conflict through John's objection to a portrait of Elizabeth, painted with a brush and palette in her hands:

> It rankled that my husband did not seem to have the generosity of spirit to recognise my work as he might the work of his colleagues. It was as if in drawing attention to my

> illustrator's labour, my portraitist had violated some unwritten code of feminine conduct ... I knew in my heart I was an artist, no matter the appearances my husband needed to keep up to meet social conventions. (Ashley, 2016, pp. 324, 327)

These elements of Elizabeth Gould's story resonate with what Novak (2017a, p. 225) identifies as classic tropes in feminist biography that persist across centuries, in particular the overcoming of barriers to achievement and recognition because of the different standards of domestic responsibility.

Lindsey takes a slightly different approach, maintaining that the differences between historical characters and people today are as important as the values and behaviours they have in common (Lindsey, 2016, p. 287). She writes that she has carefully attempted to avoid projecting present-day views onto narratives where the truth may be more fascinating than our assumptions (2016, p. 287). Lindsey depicts Margaret Gill's running of the hotel as a matter of fact: 'she would have to make do and the best way to do that was to be her husband's helpmate" (2016, p. 156). Nor does she attempt to impose current sensitivity to violence onto her characters. The description of public relish during executions reflects social values of the nineteenth century when "parents would lift their children onto their shoulders so they could see the latest felon squirm and writhe at the end of a rope" (p. 115). Lindsey's chapter notes at the end of the book make it clear that historical opinions, expressed through her characters, are based on documented evidence while flagging where she has used speculation and conjecture to further the narrative. While the larger question here is whether it is possible to wholly separate the world-view of present-day authors from the subjects they are attempting to represent, both Ashley and Lindsey carefully navigate the links between past and present worlds in their attempts to represent these women's lives.

Dialogue

For novelists attempting to write past lives, constructing credible dialogue is an acknowledged challenge as well as a fruitful means to develop character. Lackey (2014, p. 6) suggests that readers of historical novels expect language to "accurately reflect the way people spoke from the represented period". Padmore (2017) and Kate Grenville (2006, pp. 201-206) discuss their difficulties in recreating suitable voices for their characters. Grenville (2006, p. 205) found attempts to recapture nineteenth-century speech sounded like parody and opted instead for a scattering of archaic phrases in dialogue constructed for contemporary readers and included some phonetic spellings to enhance her characters' voices. Padmore (2017, para. 17) reflects that the true structure of speech in the past cannot be recreated and that many writers choose to use a form of hybrid speech. Ashley's approach is similar. She employs some archaic expressions in the text, such as "our intimate relations", referring to the Goulds' sex life (2016, p. 31), or "briny deep", the ocean (p. 289), but conversations and Elizabeth's musings are recorded in present-day language even though the events and encounters are drawn from correspondence and archival sources. Other authors describe how extant letters and diaries can yield both an authentic voice for their characters and a window to their emotions. Parini (2016, p. 23) maintains that his archival sources usually provide dialogue and emotional expression

for his characters in biofiction, while Vicars (2016) found that creation of imagined dialogue enhanced characterisation and relationships in his writing.

Lindsey also includes dialogue in *The Convict's Daughter*. While she uses imagination to superimpose the thoughts and opinions expressed by characters onto factual evidence, she states that some conversations are based on verbatim quotes from court transcripts or newspapers (Lindsey, 2016, p. 299). Two lengthy trials and over 40,000 words of reporting (Lindsay, 2016, p. xi) provide a rich source of realistic and surprisingly modern dialogue. This excerpt indicates the way details from these records are re-attributed to figures in the narrative, providing historical information as well as character insights:

> "Their schooner has just come in from the Sandwich Islands," John began, "via New Zealand, and since it arrived there have been all sorts of rumours as well as strange activities around the docks." James looked at his brother expectantly. "Well that was until yesterday," John went on, clearly enjoying keeping his younger brother in suspense, "when the *Herald* and then the *Maitland Mercury* both confirmed it." (2016, p. 153)

Lindsey embellishes the historicity of the narrative by a sprinkling of archaic expressions such as 'smacked Mudie about the chops' (p. 24) but maintains that the dialogue drawn from documentation is authentic. While the conversations in Ashley and Lindsey themselves are speculative, they are solidly based on research, contributing to the ongoing debate explored by White (1966, p. 130) and expanded by Lackey (2017, p. 345) and other theorists on the contested relationship between imagination, perceived truth and historical data.

Other signposts of fictionality

In her classic work "signposts of Fictionality", Dorrit Cohn (1990) endeavours to differentiate between texts on the basis of their use of novelists' techniques and/or the protocols of non-fiction writers. Biofictions often employ the novelist's tool of vivid imagery to create a sense of verisimilitude, to increase drama and to amplify emotions. Ashley, for instance, imagines the Australian landscape through the eyes of a British woman seeing it for the first time. This is powerfully evoked in her description of a violent storm:

> Rain at home was a grey drizzle that set in for weeks. But the pellets pouring from Yarrundi's skies produced another kind of soaking. Sensibly, all birdlife had fled. Ruptures of lightning, followed by sharp cracks of thunder, lit the sky, joining it to the hilltops like a great tree root. (Ashley, 2016, p. 274)

Later in the narrative Elizabeth symbolically reimagines this storm during the traumatic birth of her eighth child, which heralded her death (p. 363). In addition to this, Ashley acknowledges the power of Elizabeth's early death in adding tragedy to the story arc (2013). This illustrates Scaparo's claim that in recovering life stories "factual events act as a scaffolding" (2005, p. 128). Scaparo discusses how the authors in her study of female fictionalised biography made extensive use of letters, diaries and other archival evidence in rebuilding their protagonists'

lives (2005, p. 89). Ashley followed the same principle in reinstating Elizabeth Gould to public awareness, despite her work being biofiction rather than biography. Ashley does not cite references to her extensive research but does, however, describe her research journey in her author's note, confirming Cohn's proposition that absence of citations is a signpost of fiction (1990, p. 782). In a further blurring of categories, Vicars maintains that fictional biography is a valid and increasingly recognised method of exploring past lives, and the disclaimer as a work of fiction diminishes its historical basis (2016).

As described earlier, Lindsey uses chapter notes and other paratexts to signal departures from the records, but their placement after imagined sections can challenge the stability of any fact/fiction divide. Lindsey reflects that she deliberately avoided interrupting the narrative to flag her speculation, aiming instead for the reader to be immersed in a romance evocative of the style of novelists of the times such as Jane Austen or Walter Scott (2022, p. 51). She includes, for example, the following dramatic scene inspired by Mr Samuel's later pursuit of Gill for recovery of debts:

> The next minute all hell broke loose. Mr Samuel coughed to spluttering point, choking on some of the beef he had swallowed whole in shock. William jumped up and tried to help by patting the unfortunate gentleman on the back as he called for one of the kitchen staff to help. Meanwhile, at the other end of the dining table, Martin Gill had picked up the carving knife and was waving it in the air in the direction of his wife. (p. 174)

Towards the book's end, Lindsey reveals that the scene is a product of her imagination (2016, p. 302). Coming late to this understanding, readers must then rethink their assumptions and engagements with the scene – a dynamic often experienced by readers of biofictional works that outline their creative choices in author's notes or other paratexts that follow the fictional component. In both cases, the authors are using fictional techniques to draw readers into the physical and emotional worlds of their historical figures.

Conclusion

Ashley's first-person biofictional narrative and Lindsey's speculative biography blend archival material and imaginative speculation when rendering the lives of women from Australia's past. Despite different publishers' classifications, they use similar techniques to bring the circumstances of the women's lives to a broad contemporary audience. Both use thorough research, which is signalled in different ways that suit their commercial genre: Lindsey's text includes referencing and indexing protocols expected of historians (Griffiths, 2015, p. 13; McKenna, 2006, p. 107) and Ashley's work has extensive author notes (2016, pp. 377-384). Departures from the documented record are usually signalled by qualifying language in text or in explanatory notes, satisfying the ethical responsibility for disclosure and transparency. Regardless of the genre category in which their books are placed, these authors overlay their archival research with contextual and interpretative detail to present the minutiae of physical and sensory details of the daily lives of their subjects, building a character on the scaffold of documented facts. Through fresh interpretations of archival evidence, they portray subjects

capable of expressing emotions and opinions who are depicted in the context of their era and interacting with other real-life characters. By employing the techniques of fiction-writing to embellish plots with dramatisation, vivid imagery and multiple points of view, the texts discussed underscore the fragmentary nature of memory and diverse interpretations of past events. Both also include dialogue, a technique seen by some, along with language of inner action, as a signpost of fiction (Cohn, 1990, p. 778; Clendinnen, 2006, p. 18; Keener, 2001, p. 171). Such dialogue is either based on extant sources or imagined from a basis of archival research, and the authors use it to inform characters' emotions, motivations and opinions.

These shared techniques offer the authors discussed here powerful means to speculate or imagine across lacunae in documentation, strengthening their attempts to reinstate female life stories lost to history or reinterpret those whose record was distorted by a dominant power group. In doing so, Ashley and Lindsey are able to recover or reimagine women's stories from our colonial past that would otherwise remain lost through scant recording or archival bias.

References

Affirm Press (2016). The birdman's wife. https://affirmpress.com.au/publishing/the-birdmans-wife/

Allen and Unwin (n.d.). The convict's daughter. https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/general-books/history/The-Convicts-Daughter-Kiera-Lindsey-9781760630928

Alvarez, J. (2014). Fixed facts and creative freedom in the biographical novel. In M. Lackey, *Truthful fiction: Conversations with American biographical novelists* (pp. 27-41). Bloomsbury Academic.

Alvarez, J. (2019). *In the time of the butterflies*. Algonquin. (Original work published 1994).

Ashley, M. (2013). Leaves of a diary: Searching for Elizabeth Gould in the archives of the Mitchell Library. *TEXT*, 17(2) http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct13/ashley.htm

Ashley, M. (2016). *The birdman's wife*. Affirm Press.

Australian Museum (2022). Elizabeth Gould (1804-1841). Australian Museum. https://australian.museum/learn/collections/museum-archives-library/john-gould/elizabeth-gould-1804-1841

Barnes, S. (2016, June-July) *The convict's daughter* by Kiera Lindsey. *Australian Book Review*, 282. https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2016/183-june-july-2016-no-382/3373-sophia-barnes-reviews-the-convict-s-daughter-by-keira-lindsey

Brien, D.L. (2000). The place where the real and the imagined coincides: An introduction to Australia creative non-fiction. *TEXT*, Special Issue 1. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.35909.

Brien, D.L. (2014). Welcome creative subversions: Experiment and innovation in recent biographical writing. *TEXT*, 18(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.27321

Brien, D.L. (2015). "The facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination": History, fiction and speculative biography. *TEXT*, Special Issue 28, 1 21. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.27292.

Brien, D.L. (2017). Australian speculative biography: Recovering forgotten lives. In D.J. Baker, D.L. Brien & N. Sulway (Eds.) *Recovering history through fact and fiction: Forgotten lives* (pp. 11-26). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Brien, D.L. (2018). Conjectural and speculative biography: Convict and colonial biographies. In D.L. Brien & Q Eades (Eds.), *Offshoot, Contemporary life writing methodologies and practice* (pp. 13-25). UWA Publishing.

Brien D.L. and Lindsey, K. (Eds). (2022). *Speculative biography: Experiments, opportunities and provocations.* Routledge.

Clendinnen, I. (2006). The history question: Who owns the past? *Quarterly Essay*, 23, 1-72.

Cohn, D. (1990). Signposts of fictionality: A narratological perspective. *Poetics Today*, 41(4), 775-804.

Curthoys, A. & Docker, J. (2010). *Is history fiction?* (2nd edition). UNSW Press.

Griffiths, T. (2015). The intriguing dance of history and fiction. *TEXT*, Special Issue 28, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.27284.

Haebich, A. (2015). Somewhere between fiction and non-fiction: New approaches to writing crime histories. *TEXT* Special Issue 28, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.27291.

Grenville, K. (2006). *Searching for the secret river*. Text Publishing.

Keener, J.F. (2001). *Biography and the post-modern historical novel* (Vol. 3). Edwin Mellen Press.

Keneally, T. (1982). *Schindler's ark*. Hodder and Stoughton.

Lackey, M. (2014). *Truthful fictions: Conversations with American biographical novelists*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Lackey, M. (2016a). Locating and defining the bio in biofiction. a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, 31(1), 3-10. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1095583

Lackey, M. (2016b). The rise of the biographical novel and the fall of the historical novel. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31(1), 33-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1092290

Lackey, M. (2017). The future of biofiction studies. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 32(2), 343-346. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1288978

Lindsey, K. (2016). *The convict's daughter*. Allen and Unwin.

Lindsey, K. (2018). "Deliberate freedom": Exploring the role of informed imagination and speculation in historical biography. *TEXT*, Special Issue 50, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25601.

Lindsey, K. (2022) The speculative method: Scientific guesswork and narrative as laboratory. In D. L. Brien & K. Lindsey (Eds), *Speculative biography: Experiments, opportunities and provocations* (pp. 42-57). Routledge.

McKenna, M. (2006). Writing the past. In D. Modjeska (Ed.), *The best Australian essays 2006* (pp. 96-110). Black Inc.

Mullins, P. (2018). Profiling the biography of the contemporary political figure in Australia. In D.L. Brien & Q. Eades (Eds.), *Offshoot, Contemporary life writing methodologies and practice* (pp. 83-97). UWA Publishing.

Novak, J. (2017a). Feminist to postfeminist. *Angelaki*, 22(1), 223-230. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1286090

Novak, J. (2017b). Introduction. In L. Boldrini & J. Novak (Eds.), *Experiments in life-writing: Intersections of auto/biography and fiction* (pp. 1-35). Palgrave Macmillan.

Padmore, C. (2017). The paradox of writing the dead: Voice, empathy and authenticity in historical biofictions. *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research*, 3(1). https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/articles/the-paradox-of-writing-the-dead-voice-empathy-and-authenticity-in-historical-biofictions.html

Parini, J. (1997). *Benjamin's crossing*. Anchor.

Parini, J. (2014). Reflections on biographical fiction. In M. Lackey, *Truthful fictions: Conversations with American biographical novelists* (pp. 205-216). Bloomsbury Academic.

Parini, J. (2016). Writing biographical fiction: Some personal reflections. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31(1), 21-26. https://doi.org/1080/08989575.2016.1088732

Parini, J. (2019). Reading in a boom time of biographical fiction. *Lithub*. https://lithub.com/reading-in-a-boom-time-of-biographical-fiction

Price, F. (2012). "A great deal of history": Romantic women writers and historical fiction. *Women's Writing,* 19(3), 259-272. https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2012.666413

Scaparo, S. (2005). *Elusive subjects: Biography as gendered metafiction*. Troubador Publishing.

Schabert, I. (1990). *In quest of the other person: Fiction as biography*. A Franke Verlag.

Van Luyn, A. (2019). (In)famous subjects: Representing women's criminality and violence in historical biofictions. *New Writing*, 16(1), 67-76. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2018.1439510

Vicars, J. (2016). Discarding the disclaimer? Reappraising fiction as a mode of biography. *TEXT* 20(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25307.

Vicars, J. (2017a). Fiction as a biographic space for exploring "lost" lives. In D.J. Baker, D.L. Brien & N. Sulway (Eds.) *Recovering history through fact and fiction: Forgotten lives* (pp. 99-109). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Vicars, J. (2017b). Keira [sic] Lindsey, *the convict's daughter* book review. *Journal of Colonial History,* 19, 196-197.

Vicars, J. (2018). True histories: Using fiction in writing lives. In D.L. Brien & Q. Eades (Eds.), *Offshoot, Contemporary life writing methodologies and practice* (pp. 63-80). UWA Publishing.

White, H.V. (1966). The burden of history. *History and Theory*, 5(2), 111-134. https://doi.org/10.2307/2504510