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Western Sydney University

Gretchen Shirm

The writing is the method: Process, method, research in Fiona McGregor's A Novel Idea

Abstract:
This essay argues that fiction writing is a distinct form of research and way of thinking in which the methodology is generated in the writing. Unlike other forms of research, the research problems arise for the writer during the act of writing. However, within an academic setting, writers are often required to set out their methodology in advance of their project and provide a retrospective account in the form of an exegesis. Fiona McGregor's *A Novel Idea* demonstrates the practical difficulty in both writing and paying attention to methodology at the same time, thus problematising the exegetical component of fiction writing in retrospect. A way forward might be to require fiction writers within the academy to state their aims for a piece of fiction, recognising that the methodology and knowledge will be generated within the writing. The "original contribution to knowledge" component of these aims can be assessed by the writer's intention to create something new, whether through formal innovations or approach to subject. In terms of accountability, the writer's capacity to deliver on their intention can be measured by their previous output and, retrospectively, by an examination of the novel itself and its drafts.

Biographical note:
Dr Gretchen Shirm is the author of three books of fiction. Her most recent novel, *Where the Light Falls*, explored the confluences between writing and photography and was shortlisted for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Awards. *The Crying Room* will be published in July 2023. She teaches in the creative writing program at the Writing and Society Research Centre, Western Sydney University and the Writing a Novel course at Faber Academy.

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Methodology in fiction writing

I am presently applying for a grant within the university sector for which I intend to, amongst other things, write a novel. The key "innovation" in this writing project is the experimentation in the novel's form: in it, I am intending to use documentary material, thus combining fiction and non-fiction in a novel way. Some of the research methodologies I will use to write the novel, and to conduct the related research that informs the novel, uses conventional research techniques such as archival research, historical research and a review of the literature. In respect of these tasks, it is reasonably straightforward to outline a methodology because they involve discrete and identifiable components.

However, fiction writing sits in a wholly different category to these conventional research techniques. The writing of a novel involves, as we know, its own form of research. But novel-writing, and writing more generally, also involves its own unique methodology. Novel-writing, in fact, cannot be described as a set of discrete and identifiable tasks because many of the tasks in writing the novel do not unfold until the novel has been, at least in part, written.

As a novelist, it is close to impossible to explain to another person what one does with one's time, though time is undoubtedly a crucial component. The trick to writing isn't simply just to sit down and "write it". As Nam Le writes in his short story *Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice*, writing is not simply a matter of getting an event down on the page. Le ironically deploys his narrator's observation that "Things happened in this world all the time. All I had to do was record them" (2008, p. 7), and thus gestures toward the complexity and enormity of the task. The task of fiction writing is obviously not as simple as "recording"; the most pressing of the novelist's tasks is in the decisions he or she makes about language and representation: questions of style, genre, mode, narration, structure, expression, and so forth. As Philip Roth suggests, "Worse than not knowing your subject is not knowing how to treat it, because that's finally everything" (as cited in Gourevitch, 2009, p. 206).

There is the idea one has for the writing project and then there is what has been written as a result of that idea. As Stephanie Bishop writes:

> The second version is what is actually there on the page, which is often a mess of scraps, half-chapters, fragments that appear in the wrong place. That pattern isn't clear. The very problem of the work is obscure. Too many things are wrong to know which loose thread to pull at. Which to weave back in. There is both too much and not enough going in: the mess is repellent, too difficult. (Bishop, 2021, p. 275)

As Bishop goes on to explain, the challenge of writing is to understand what is in the first draft and to see what has been written in the draft clearly for what it is. But what is written, the ultimate novel that results from this writing, might be "radically different" to the idea we began with.

In this way, to methodologise the task of writing, to set out a plan in advance, is to try to order the unknown. But it is the unknown that we are attempting to discover as we write. In a sense a writer must uncover their "original contribution to knowledge" as they go, and this is what distinguishes writing from other forms of research. As many professional writers will attest, sometimes the writing – in its patterns, rhythms, and metaphors – understands more than we as writers do. It is the act of writing that gives us access to this knowledge, and to set out a methodology would require us to have some grasp of that knowledge before it "occurs".

Nonetheless, within the academy, writers are subject to the same or similar requirements as traditional researchers to methodologise their writing process in advance of the writing. This, in my opinion, fundamentally misunderstands the task of writing and its nature as a form of research. Consequently, in grant applications and research proposals, writers are placed in the impossible position of having to construct a "methodology" for their writing process that may bear little or no resemblance to the process that actually unfolds. Even after the fact of writing, writers within the academy are often asked to provide an exegetical account of their methodology, which may be difficult or impossible to reconstruct. Given the exegesis is a standard component of Higher Research Degrees within the field of creative writing, writers are introduced to a research paradigm that is fundamentally at odds with the nature of writing as a research activity. Both these requirements impede writers working within the academy, curbing their process and potentially resulting in an inferior output, which is in the interests of neither the writer nor the academy.

The only other occasion on which I have had to methodologise the writing of a novel was for my doctorate. Moreover, the majority of scholarship written on methodology for creative writers has been directed at candidates for Higher Research Degrees (Skains, 2018; Webb, 2015; Sempert et al., 2017; Alberts et al., 2017; Aung Thin et al., 2020). When I look back at the methodology provided as a part of my application for my doctorate, although I had a good grasp of the concepts my writing would draw on which were addressed in the exegesis – which was the critical theory of photography – the information I provided about my (as then unwritten) novel was largely a synopsis. In other words, it was a descriptive account of my narrator and his central dilemma; it was an idea. In retrospect, there *is* some loose resemblance between the synopsis I provided and the novel that I wrote and was published (*Where the Light Falls*, Allen & Unwin, 2016), but it seems to me that this synopsis says very little about the methodology I undertook as I wrote the novel.

Moreover, when I reflect on that process, it is difficult to articulate the steps I went through to end up with the final, published novel. I know that I wrote the first draft longhand, which I then typed up, but that manuscript went through 23 subsequent drafts before it was published. Most of the time was spent sitting with that draft and attempting to improve it, to make the language "sound" better, to find the novel's story. In fact, the process might best be described as addressing questions as they arose about plot, character, style and theme. It was a process of correcting what was there, based most likely on my tacit knowledge of the novel form drawn from years of reading and writing.

The problem of writing a novel is that the process is very ad hoc – the novel is not actually an answer to a question, but an answer to a series of questions that arise during the course of writing it. The "problem", in fact, is the novel itself. Moreover, novel-writing seems unique in terms of its process as a form of research in the way that one doesn't start with a question, usually, but the questions arise in the process. As Roth puts it when he starts writing, "what matters most isn't there at all. I don't mean the solutions to problems, I mean the problems themselves" (as cited in Gourevitch, 2009, p. 206).

Certainly, novel-writing *is* a process of trial and error, or as writers might explain it, a process of writing and re-writing. Castles, for example, describes writing as "getting the words down in fits and starts and then the replacement of perhaps most of them" (2019, p. 4). This, of course, fits with the conception that has been theorised by a number of researchers, of practice as research. That is, as other creative writing scholars have explained, creative practice is a distinct form of research, and that process itself gives rise to unique insights. In other words, the practice is the research. To apply this directly to writing – *the writing is the research*.

It is one thing to accept though that novel writing gives rise to new theoretical and practical insights and quite another to insist that it falls within a straightforward methodological paradigm. Webb explains that this is, in part, to do with the fact that creative writing within the academy has a very short history (2015, p. 54), and also because creative writing is not directed towards problem solving or theoretical advances, but "more likely to be directed towards seeing things differently" (p. 70). In fiction writing, new knowledge certainly arises but it is rarely communicated in propositional terms.

This article addresses the question of methodology in fiction writing – separate from the methodology of research related to novel-writing (such as archival research that informs the fiction). The problem arises both in advance of the writing and subsequently in the "exegetical output" the writer is often required to produce, particularly within the Higher Research Degree program. In both cases, the problem of methodology in respect to fiction writing seems to be one of circularity in that the problems are generated *in the writing*. Accordingly, this article addresses the question of the difficulty of staking out a research plan for the writing aspects of producing a work of fiction and of convincingly reconstructing it afterwards in an exegesis. It argues that in respect of the discrete task of actually writing the fiction, the writing is the research *and* the methodology.

The current research (Skains, 2018; Webb, 2015; Sempert et al., 2017; Alberts et al. 2017; Aung Thin et al., 2020) tends to focus on the problem of fiction writing within the academy as inseparable from some form of exegesis – illuminating, explaining, or commenting on the fictional work in some way. This essay, though, is concerned with the discrete issue of the methodology of writing itself, seen separately from any research that is peripheral or parallel to the fiction writing. This crucial question seems to be somewhat submerged in the scholarship to date, but since a novel is its own distinct research output, it seems rather pivotal that writing practitioners within the academy have some clarity on this point.

Fiction writing and methodology

The problem of method in writing is not unique to my experience. Rather, this dilemma is endemic to the task itself. As Debra Adelaide, for example, has written:

> I have written for more than twenty-five years, I have thought about writing a great deal, taught it, written about it, but I remain convinced that writing is fundamentally a mystery, that one of the worst things I can do when writing is to overthink it. When I have thought too hard about my writing, it has failed …
>
> Instead, I have learned to embrace the baggy, cloudy thing that lies just out of my line of sight and grope around in the cold and dark until something, anything, tangible emerges, sometimes just one short scene, but clear enough to keep me going. (Adelaide D., 2021, p. 224)

Adelaide's description, in fact, captures the dilemma a writer faces. One often doesn't know what one is writing until one has written it, or has struck upon something that comes to life for the writer on the page. As Graham Greene puts it, "I think I know what the next novel is about, but one never really knows, of course, until it is finished" (as cited in Gourevitch, 2007, p. 6).

To illustrate this further, when writing her 2015 novel *The Natural Way of Things*, Charlotte Wood initially started with the idea of an historical novel set in the 1960s and 1970s, based on historical research she had done into the Hay Institution for Girls. Wood says that she was incredibly moved by the research she had done into this institution that imprisoned girls who had somehow been deemed "wayward or promiscuous" (2021, p. 56). But when she wrote about these young girls:

> a pressing problem quickly emerged: the writing was dreadful. The characters were lifeless cliches; nothing on the page surprised. The inner deadness I'd felt on hearing what the real girls suffered had spread to my language, to the sentences and the story, and my imagination could not revive them. (Wood, 2021, p. 56-57)

The solution to place this narrative in the future because "the substance of this book, could not remain neatly in the past" (Wood, 2021, p. 57) occurred to Wood only after several months of writing. In other words, Wood had a clear vision for the novel which the act of writing quickly undid.

This sort of impasse is echoed by Alice Munro, who says in her interview with *The Paris Review* that the majority of her short stories get to the point where she decides to abandon them, and she does often in fact abandon them and goes about her life, only to have the "solution" occur to her at a later point out of the blue. She observes:

> Then, I will suddenly come up with something about the story that I abandoned: I will see how to do it. But that only seems to happen after I've said, No, this isn't going to work, forget it. (as cited in Gourevitch, 2007, p. 407)

Any sort of methodology or synopsis in the processes described by Wood or Munro would, in fact, be meaningless. Or perhaps not exactly meaningless, because it is the idea that leads to the writing, that leads to the problem, and that is what ultimately allows the fiction to be written. We might say, then, that what Wood, Munro, Adelaide, Castles, Bishop, Greene and Roth have in common is an intention to write on a particular topic and to do so in an original way. It is that starting point which is common to all writing. Within academic language, what a novelist may be able to state are their *aims* in writing.

In her book, *The Luminous Solution* (2021), Wood draws on research into creativity, which she identifies as applying very closely to her own writing process. One of the key problems in writing is that one does not have a problem before one starts writing. She draws on research by Getzels and Csikszenmihalyia into the creative process, who write:

> Prior to [a creative problem's] emergence there is no structure and no task; there is nothing to solve. After the problem emerges, the skills of the artist take over; control and ordering begin. [But] the crucial cognitive step is how the formless situation where there is no problem to solve … is transformed into a situation where a problem for solution emerges. (as cited in Wood, 2021, p.22)

For Wood, and other fiction writers with whom she conferred, the process of writing the novel, of finding the questions that needed answering at all, followed a pattern of what she called "heat-seeking" (2021, p. 100). The novelist's job was to find the "heat", working through many patches of "dead material" (2021, p. 27) in order to find something worth pursuing. As Wood writes, this was "Anything that quickened the interest of the writer when she thought of it, whether or not it made any rational sense at all, was a signal that important material lay there" (2021, p. 27).

The key for Wood is that the problem, or problems, do not emerge until one starts to write, or until one is well into the project. If there is, as Wood argues, no problem to solve at the beginning of writing a novel, then this surely problematises any sort of methodology for a writer, *particularly before they have started writing*. But also, I would argue in retrospect, if the writer is following the intuitive commands of the writing, one is not also in a position to capture one's process *at the same time*. Fiona McGregor's *A Novel Idea*, examined below, neatly illustrates this point.

Wood describes the process of writing one particular novel (which she does not name) as deeply problematic and uneven: the task of the writing arduous. But towards the end of that process, Wood describes entering an unexpected state of "rapture" (Wood, 2021, p. 215) which she describes as follows:

> The whole book, previously so misshapen and lumpen, now appeared absolutely whole and clear and present in my mind, so much so that it felt I was actually inside it, moving swiftly through the entire work. I knew exactly what to do and where and how to do it. I could lift sections and shift them to precisely the right place elsewhere in the novel,

> deepening and repairing, using solutions and ideas that had never come to me in all the years I'd struggled with the book. (Wood, 2021, p. 217)

This state, Wood surmises, was only possible because of the length of time she had spent immersed in the manuscript and the level of familiarity she had achieved with it prior to this point.

As the above writers demonstrate, novel writing is hermetic in that it both poses its own research questions and answers them as they arise. A novel cannot be methodologised simply by providing a synopsis or overview since many of the problems a novelist encounters are not to do with *what happens* in the novel, but how the novel is written. They are questions of language as much as they are questions of narrative structure and plot. To illustrate this, in his interview with Grenville and Woolfe, Peter Carey talks about a process called "cantileving — starting the same piece several times and getting a little further each time" (1993, p. 39). Carey says that when he starts a new chapter, he often feels that it is inauthentic, "somehow it's lying, somehow it's not true. So I go back and start again" and he says that in using that process, "it becomes more fully imagined" (p. 39). Carey's observations help us to understand the way in which the novelist's attention is focused on questions to do with the way that subject matter is represented. His question of "authenticity" might be framed for a literary studies scholar as a question of "verisimilitude", but for Carey it is also bound up with his peculiar sensibility and writing style. John Cheever describes the same process thus: "it's probably what you'd call instinct. When a line falls wrong, it simply isn't right" (as cited in Gourevitch, 2008, p. 163). A novelist's choices are, primarily, to do with language and, within the academy, these are the sorts of questions a novelist ought to be focused on, since innovations in writing derive from paying particularly intense attention to language and the patterns, sounds, images and the forms it might take. These constitute the "original contribution to knowledge" in their own right,

At this point, it is worth observing that the Australian Research Council's definition of "research" can certainly encompass the processes described by Wood and Carey above. The *State of Australian University Research* report 2015–2016 provides:

> research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative. (Australian Research Council, 2015, p. 3)

And yet, while the use of new and existing knowledge in creative ways to generate new understandings certainly has the potential to capture the task of writing, the strictures in place around writing within the academy do not recognise that the writing processes and methodologies might themselves be innovative. As Sullivan writes, writers and other creative practitioners are "beholden to a set of methodological conventions that are imported from other fields" (as cited in Smith & Dean, 2009, p. 46).

What is "writing"?

In order to answer the question of how we might usefully methodologise the writing process, it is necessary to first understand what we do when we write. In creative practice scholarship, two main ideas have gained cogency as a way of explaining what practitioners do. Haseman, for example, has argued that creative writing is performative, in that "practitioner researchers do not merely 'think' their way through or out of a problem, but rather they 'practice' to a resolution" (2010, p. 147).

For Haseman writing is performative in both its writing and also the way in which the writing is communicated. To apply his paradigm to fiction writing, the novel is the communication of the results. According to Haseman, the knowledge generated is then "reported through symbolic language" (2010, p. 148). Haseman configures practice-based research as an experiential process that is "individualistic and idiosyncratic" (2006, p. 100) which involves performative elements in production, the output of which records and performs the research results of production. Haseman argues that the practice itself "is the principal research activity" (p. 103), and also questions the utility of any additional output, claiming the novel or artwork is a complete expression of the research process.

On the other hand, Bolt argues that knowledge derived in creative practice is "a very specific sort of knowing, a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice" (2010, p. 29). The materials, Bolt argues, are not used by the practitioner passively, but the artist actually generates knowledge by considering the relationship between her materials. Bolt writes that "as a mode of thought, material thinking involves a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice. Material thinking is the logic of practice" (p. 30).

Bolt relies on Heidegger's idea that we know "the world theoretically, only after we have come to understand it through handling" (Bolt, 2010, p. 30). This is the way in which new knowledge emerges in creative practice. It is in the practice – in the coming together of the aspects of the writer's technical skills and knowledge, her subject matter and expertise with language, filtered through her particular experience of the world – that the new knowledge is generated.

Though Bolt's conception of handleability is different to Haseman's notion of the performative nature of creative practice, the two ideas are not necessarily inconsistent. That is to say it is possible to the consider writing as both performative and a process in which knowledge is generated through the handling of the manuscript. These ideas are two ways of theorising the same activity.

Specifically, on the question of writing as research, Webb conceives of writing as a deeply interior process that involves the meeting of conscious and unconscious processes and emotions, drawing on the writer's finely attuned writing skills and knowledge derived from their immersion in their artform. In fact, Webb's conception of writing is the one which most

closely matches the language professional writers use to describe what they do. She describes writing as:

> a conscious act of drawing on established knowledge; time spent in evaluating and testing alternatives; and thinking consciously about your own process. This latter means being aware of your own emotional or attitudinal states as well as the facts and techniques. (2015, p. 120)

What is attractive about Webb's description is the degree to which she acknowledges the level of focus required by a writer in producing their work. Webb argues that writing relies on a myriad of different sorts of knowledge and experience connecting within the writer's mind, and is not:

> a matter of switching off the brain and running on neutral; it is a matter of having become so habituated to the actions we perform that we seem to be running on automatic pilot. But there is nothing automatic about this in a practical sense: it is the outcome of thorough training, and of comprehensive investment in the field. (2015, p. 115)

For Webb, writing is the meeting of internal processes and external engagement –the writer is always collecting materials that might be useful to their writing – their entire approach to observing is always alert to the possibilities of writing. For Webb, writing is a whole-body experience, incorporating the individualistic aspects of the writer's personal experience, their skills learned during previous practice and their cultural and emotional sensitivities. Webb conceives of writing as a deeply immersive experience, which is illustrated well in McGregor's book discussed below. Webb writes:

> We feel emotions in our bodies, of course and the physical response, of tension, of excitement, of dullness, or of pleasure will indicate just how we are engaging intellectually with the issue ... In fact, it is in the use of our bodies that we marry the abstract and the concrete, the theory and the technique. (2015, p. 120)

Webb's account perhaps comes closest to capturing what it is like to write – the intensity of the experience of writing – the fact that much of the novelist's material comes from inside them, or from what they have observed in life. This accords with Barrett's idea that "creative arts practice as research is an intensification of everyday experiences from which new knowledge or knowing emerges" (2007, p. 115).

Coming from a different area of expertise (although a novelist himself), Uhlmann argues that the process of writing and of producing works of literature involves its own form of thinking. Literature, according to Uhlmann, is a form of thinking dependent upon the writer's experience of sensation and the expression of sensation through words. That is, it is not simply the communication of knowledge; it is itself a form of knowing. As Uhlmann explains:

> sensation comes to us from outside: it is, or comprises the expression of the world; it is a sign or a multiplicity of signs … In the case of art, it is then organised by the mind of the artist, before being expressed once more as sensation through the work of art. (2011, p. 147)

Uhlmann thus acknowledges the degree of "work" that occurs within the writer before it is symbolised on the page. A sentence, for Uhlmann, is a sensation for Virginia Woolf as much as paint was a sensation for Cezanne. Following this logic, "sensation itself, as cognitive scientists … and philosophers … have come to affirm, deserves to be understood to be thought as much as language is thought" (2011, p. 65). This idea that literature is itself a unique form of thought lends itself to the idea that writing is its own unique process that does not lend itself to elaboration. Literature, in other words, according to Uhlmann is irreducible – not only is it a process, but it is a thing that exists in the world.

Uhlmann goes one step further than Haseman and Bolt. For Uhlmann, the writing, being its own sensation, *is* the knowing, rather than a communication of the knowledge. The rhythm of a sentence and the pattern of the words creates sound waves "that pass as sound waves through the air, or are silently sounded as verbal images by the neurons within the brain" (Uhlmann, 2011, p. 61). Indeed, it is very often their attunement with language, an awareness of the material properties of language as well as their referential ones, that characterises the work of the novelist. It is in this sensitivity to the different properties of language, in learning to use it in new ways, that is the work of the writer. Very often, writing communicates "emphatic human responses to time in its passage" (Gross & McDowell, 1996, p. 10), using language in a phonic, rhythmic and rhetorical manner and communicating emotional or affective knowledge in a way that propositional language simply cannot do. Writers find new ways to communicate experience and these innovations are detectable within the writing that is produced.

I suspect that for Uhlmann, not all writing would involve a communication of new knowledge. What is evident in Uhlmann's study, and observations by Webb and others, is the level of attention to the way the language is used in the writing process. It is not only the *what* of the writing that creates the new knowledge, but the peculiar linguistic choices made by the writer in the process of understanding the subject matter, in finding a new way of seeing, and experiencing it and communicating it to the reader. It seems to me that the new knowledge, the writing as thinking that Uhlmann is arguing for, relates to the intimacy of the connection between language and subject matter. In this regard, many novels may fall short of this in that their intention might be say, to entertain, rather than to discover something new through language.

There is a certain confluence between Uhlmann's ideas about literature and creative practice scholars who have attempted to describe the process of writing. Uhlmann's ideas capture the epistemological status of writing, whereas creative practitioners attempt to describe process by which literature or artworks are generated. Uhlmann's ideas, though, have the potential to provide further illumination to the way we think about writing and what sort of artefact we are producing, particularly as writers.

Uhlmann has also considered method and process as it relates to the writing of novelist J.M. Coetzee (2020). Uhlmann investigates Coetzee's claim that fiction can grant us access to "truth" and Uhlmann's research concludes that truth is "a feeling of understanding" (p. 211) that can indeed be experienced through writing and reading. As Uhlmann explains Coetzee's process (by reference to his notebooks and drafts of *Waiting for the Barbarians*), Coetzee follows an intuitive process – a felt understanding of truth that is interrogated in the writing process, in which different styles and forms are attempted (p. 69). Coetzee, for example, uses elements of both the realist and symbolic mode. According to Uhlmann, writing is used in order to test a writer's intuitive understanding of truth.

That writing process only becomes "method" when the "right form can be found" (Uhlmann, 2020, p. 74), as method involves the use of certain techniques to "generate meaningful effects for readers" (p. 48). "Process in art," argues Uhlmann, "is a story of composition and that story has, for its themes, the methods that emerge to force that meaningful thing into being" (p. 72). Accordingly, novel-writing is a way of reaching its own unique truth, starting with the writer's feeling of a truth, proceeding through process to test that truth, and finding a method to contain it. Uhlmann's definitions are illuminating because they account for writing that is not included in the final draft of the manuscript – the shadow writing, so to speak, which is itself a necessary component of the writing, but not detectable in the final draft.

To connect this idea directly to the practice of writing, John Cheever states in his interview with *The Paris Review*:

> Fiction is experimentation; when it ceases to be that, it ceases to be fiction. One never puts down a sentence without the feeling that it has never been put down before in such a way, and that perhaps even the substance of the sentence has never been felt. Every sentence is an innovation. (as cited in Gourevitch, 2008, p. 157)

Interestingly, Cheever refers to the "feeling" of newness in the writing – connecting to Uhlmann's ideas of intuitive truths. Certainly, Cheever's description captures a sense that something is being discovered as the writer proceeds, and the discovery occurs through language.

When Uhlmann's ideas are read alongside the scholarship on creative practice, it seems that some of the claims made by creative writing scholars have been too conservative. Literature, for Uhlmann, is a distinct mode of thinking and contains its own form of understanding. As Uhlmann writes, "Literature is capable of helping us to understand by engaging us in processes of understanding" (2020, p. 211). Writing is the process by which the work of literature comes into being or, for Uhlmann, is composed – the method is the techniques within the novel itself. The method is evidenced in the novel in different writing styles, perspectives, aesthetic distancing and linguistic choices. In other words, the writing is, *ipso facto*, the method.

Method writing and Fiona McGregor's *A Novel Idea*

The scholarship on method in creative writing, or practice-based research, tends to focus on the insights that can be generated *during* the writing process. That is to say, the insights that the practice of writing can lead to separate from the writing itself, focusing very often on the exegesis as a vehicle for explaining the insights derived in creative practice. Skains makes the useful distinction between "practice-led research" which "focuses on the nature of creative practice, leading to new knowledge of operational significance for that practice, in order to advance knowledge about or within practice" (2018, p. 85), and "practiced based research" where the writing itself is "the basis of the contribution to knowledge" (p. 86). This article is focused on the latter.

Some scholars have recommended journalling as a way of drawing insights from the creative writing process (Alberts et al., 2017, p. 6). However, those who advocate some form of exegetical writing to sit alongside the writing of fiction, I think, undervalue the significance of a creative work as an output in its own right, particularly when regarding the claims made by Uhlmann. Moreover, requiring a fiction writer to *also* derive insights from their own process *as they write* underestimates the nature of the novel writing task in its intensity and duration. It is here that Fiona McGregor's *A Novel Idea* (2019) shows us the scale and all-consuming nature of fiction writing as an undertaking.

Skains argues for a "self-directed form of ethnomethodology during the composition of text, in the form of a research log (noting insights, process, difficulties) and draft materials and revision notes" (2018, p. 67). While this approach might be appropriate for shorter writing projects, in my view, such an approach underestimates the level of immersion required in the novel-writing process, as demonstrated in *A Novel Idea*. McGregor's book is significant here, because the process recorded is the writing itself as distinct from any related research that may have been necessitated by McGregor before writing. That is to say, it records the discrete process of writing, within the model of practiced-based research, rather than any attendant factual or theoretical inquiry.

A Novel Idea combines both photographic and written essay to examine the practice of novel writing "under the rubric of endurance performance" (McGregor, 2019, p. 357). By using a non-verbal form of representation to capture the process of writing a novel, McGregor's *A Novel Idea* neatly captures the difficulty of methodologising novel-writing as a process. In fact, what *A Novel Idea* emphasises is the importance of McGregor's presence and immersion in her manuscript, to the exclusion of any other activity.

In the way it combines photograph and text, *A Novel Idea* is an example of photobiography. Photobiography uses elements of photography in either written or image form alongside autobiography, where the image is a conceptual touchstone that informs the interpretation of the text (Kawakami, 2013). It is significant that McGregor has chosen a non-linguistic form of representation to capture her novel-writing process, suggesting the limitations of language to perform that task. McGregor's concentration is, as shown in the images, almost entirely in the

manuscript in progress itself. *A Novel Idea* demonstrates the way that fiction writing is resistant to a comprehensive methodology, particularly insofar as it might be described in words.

The photographs in *A Novel Idea* document McGregor's presence each day at her writing desk, but since the actual process unfolding in writing the novel is invisible in the photograph (happening instead in the novel manuscript, or McGregor's body and mind), McGregor is the only person who "knows" what the photograph is representing. As such, the photographs in *A Novel Idea* reference a sort of paradox – the lack of any detectable method in McGregor's process, apart from her continuing presence with the manuscript.

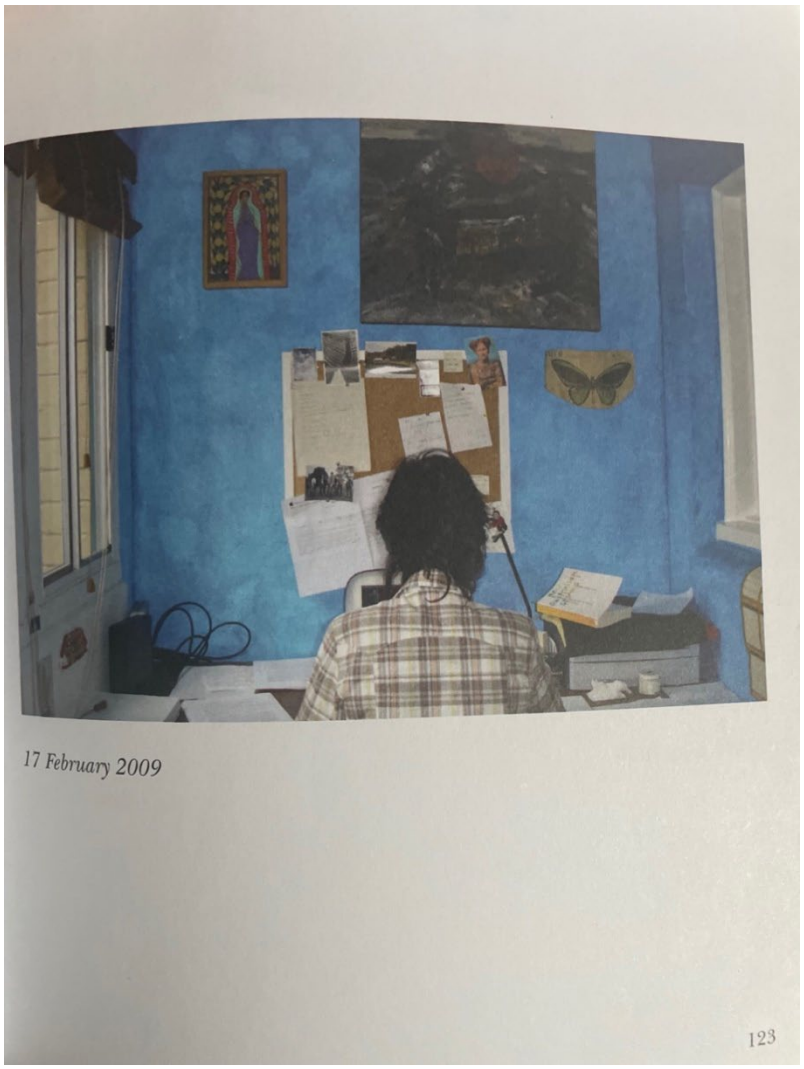

Figure 1: 17 February 2009, photograph from McGregor's A Novel Idea (McGregor, 2019, p. 123)

In McGregor's book the photographs form a sequence that speak to the novelist's frustrations, doubt and uncertainties, and the sheer duration of the process of novel writing. The photographs are dated and corresponding each image is a brief commentary on what is represented. The photographs begin on 11 November 2007 and the last printed photograph is dated 4 December 2010. In total, there are over 350 images documenting her process. *A Novel Idea* is a contemporaneous account of the writing process in that the photographs and "essay" were

produced at the time of writing; in that way they represent a visual journal of her experience. McGregor says that her intention was to show the "banal, gruelling and lonely" (2019, p. 359) work of the novelist.

By incorporating photographs in *A Novel Idea* and using the chronological sequence of images as the organisational structure for the book, McGregor uses this form to provide an account of creative practice. McGregor's writing process is often chaotic, haphazard, obsessive at times and intermittent at others. For example, breaks in the photographic sequence are indicated in the dates of the images. McGregor tells us she works up to ten days straight when she's on a roll (2019, p. 172). At one point, McGregor observes after a break of two months, "I arrived with cocaine-encrusted nostrils from partying in London" (p. 276). Her life outside writing bleeds into the writing process as she describes her dreams, her clothes, the bookshelf behind her. Sometimes she takes photographs of her food or the book she is reading. Towards the end of the writing process, she works 12-hour days, "I'm a workaholic. Or maybe just obsessive. Novelists do tend to be sloggers. Nature of the medium" (p. 171).

Overall, *A Novel Idea* captures the "thereness" of writing: the writer's presence at her desk with her manuscript, receptive to new insights and connections. Accordingly, an apparent "lack" occurs within the images because the novelist often doesn't work with any "materials" other than language itself. While the book provides evidence that the writing is happening in the form of photographs, McGregor's process in the images is inscrutable.

Though neither text nor image are able to capture the actual "writing" of the novel, the presence of both synthesise the unfolding of creative practice as we infer McGregor generating ideas, selecting from them, testing, refining and developing them. McGregor describes a selection of these activities, instead of providing us with a running account, and we infer their ongoing nature in view of the unfolding images. Though photographs are static themselves, the accumulation of images and their corresponding dates give us an impression of time passing. "I have missed the deadline for the delivery of this novel about three times … My publisher wants to kill me" (2019, pp. 97–99), McGregor says, less than halfway through the book.

The playful irony of McGregor's photos is that though nothing *appears* to be happening, her presence at her writing desk records, in these images, the fact of it. A linguistic description of every step of writing the novel would quickly become tedious, perhaps even excruciating and unreadable. More to the point, it would remove the novelist from the process of writing itself.

McGregor's text captures these less tangible aspects of the process, as she encounters and overcomes frustrations, and as ideas occur to her suddenly and apparently from nowhere. She often refers to the frustration of the novelist, "Consider the novelist who sits at their desk day after day year after year with nothing but twenty-six letters for material" (McGregor, 2019, p. 7). Yet, the irony is that McGregor does continue to show up, as the photographs document,

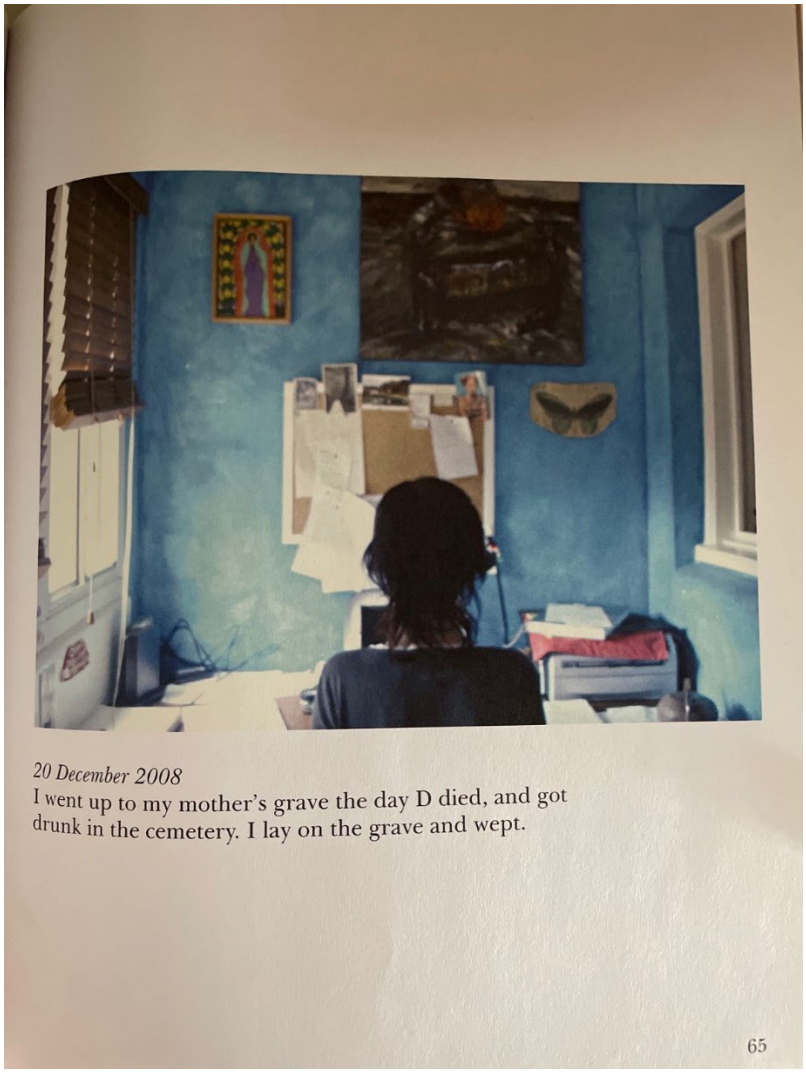

Figure 2:20 December 2008, photograph from McGregor's A Novel Idea (McGregor, 2019, p. 65)

and continues to persevere, despite the enormity and frustrations of her task; her "extraordinary stamina … is spectacularised in print for posterity" (Hamilton, 2019).

Recalling Coetzee's process of testing different styles, and Carey's quest for "authenticity" in his words, McGregor laments, "I don't understand why rewriting a scene I've written about ten times already can take as long as writing a scene fresh" (2019, p. 36). At one level, McGregor's activity in these images looks straightforward, but that is because a great deal of the novel-writing process occurs below the surface, in the body and the mind of the writer. In the images throughout *A Novel Idea*, McGregor generally has her back to the viewer. Her facial expressions and emotions are inscrutable, except insofar as McGregor describes them to us. At one point she notes, "I'm loving the book in general at the moment", followed by, "Yeah baby, I'm on a roll'" (pp. 44–45).

But the more common moods expressed by McGregor are ones of frustration and disappointment. McGregor tells us about her dreams and later, "I'm sick of the pills" (2019, p.

125). Later still, she tells us she comes off the pills because, "they are making me sick. I try to keep writing" (p. 141). The writing becomes harder for her because she is "so dizzy [she] can hardly sit up" (p. 142) and this period is followed by a lull in productivity. It is not the manuscript itself that has caused this but McGregor's mood, brought on by illness perhaps, or the side effects of medication. McGregor also refers to her relationship with her girlfriend from time to time. She notes early on her love for her girlfriend. But later, they fight, and she is, "Thrown sideways, catastrophised" (p. 143). When the relationship ends, she tells us that she retreats into the novel and observes, "Writing is an escape. A hibernation" (p. 197).

We also detect a certain sensibility in McGregor's approach to life in her ironic asides and self-deprecating humour – "I bought this dress for my four-year-old niece. Instead it fitted me" (2019, p. 88) – and even in the blue walls of the room she writes within. These sorts of attitudes inevitably shape the writing, though the writer may not be entirely conscious of them or their impact. *A Novel Idea* also reflects the solitude of the enterprise and its removal from interpersonal relationships, social life and family life, while at the same time documenting those types of interactions in the output. In that way, McGregor also shows us what the novelist is foregoing in the time that is spent writing. At one point when McGregor is at a writing residency, she has no distractions – she is the only resident and her host speaks Estonian. She describes the "sudden isolation" as "devastating" (p. 276). Yet, from the images, we get the impression that insofar as the novel-writing is concerned, this is a uniquely productive period. She observes, "There is nothing to do but write" (p. 295). During this sequence, McGregor seems very detached from life, there are few references to interruptions by others and she takes comfort in nature.

In image after image, McGregor is pictured in her writing chair in what is an ordinary seated position before the manuscript, suggesting a kind of contortion is taking place to enable the writing. At one point, she includes a photograph of her notes and comments, "I will forget all these notes" (2019, p. 214).

On one day McGregor says she managed to write only "forty-two miserable words" (2019, p. 95), yet gradually, painstakingly, the novel is written, as long as McGregor is present. McGregor often uses an ironic wit to lament her frustrations; she meets a novelist who tells her he writes 1000 words a day and she says, "Fuck, Roger, how do you write a thousand words a day?" (p. 100), and later after some success, "Take that, Rodge" (p. 104). McGregor's book speaks to novel-writing as a test of endurance, of false finishes: "Finished! Wah! This draft anyway …" (p. 273). Towards the end of the process, she talks about the act of writing being in fact "cutting" (p. 314) from the manuscript.

McGregor says early on in *A Novel Idea*, "How could I work on a novel about place, where the house is sold, without writing an auction scene? But I did. For, like, five years. Durr." (2019, pp. 39–41). These sorts of slow, incremental and sometimes sudden and unexpected discoveries also support the idea that writing draws on "internalised, historicised knowledge" (Webb, 2015,

Figure 3: 29 July 2009, photograph from McGregor's A Novel Idea (McGregor, 2019, p. 276)

p. 116). Towards the end, we gain glimpses of the manuscript on the screen of McGregor's computer, with comments made by her editor, though this seems almost secondary to the process of writing itself – the figuring of the novel has been done at this point.

Fiction writing methodology: A way forward

Cowen has observed that in most academic settings, creative writing is bifurcated in the sense that while a novelistic output is considered research in and of itself, it is often required (particularly in the Australian setting) to be accompanied by a work that "somehow 'translates' what is *sui generis* about art into propositional terms" (2020, p. 12). *A Novel Idea*, though, attests to the very difficulty of unpicking, or reverse engineering, the creative process, in the sense that even a *contemporaneous* account of the novel-writing is unable to document in any detail the methodological process. Much of the "process" McGregor records is turning up to her writing desk with her manuscript so that the insights and connections that result in the novel can occur to her. The fact of McGregor's presence at the writing desk suggests that new knowledge is being generated.

In requiring an additional work that translates the novel into propositional terms there is a risk, that communicating this process is reductive, particularly because in some ways the novelist is not even aware of the way in which language is working through them as they write. This is why, as Haseman has identified, requiring a writer to also report their research findings "in traditional forms of research (words or numbers) can only result in the dilution and ultimately the impoverishment of the epistemological content embedded and embodied in practice" (2010, p. 148). More than this, it has the potential to skew the writing process so that the writer isn't focused only on the writing but also on how they might justify or explain their process in advance, or in retrospect. This has the potential to detract from the process of writing itself and from the product that is produced.

McGregor's book playfully refutes the schism that defines writing within the academy. The process McGregor undertakes involves a considerable, inordinate even, investment of time, thought, reflection, concentration and redrafting. Since much of this work "is performed without a lot of conscious consideration or reflection" (Webb, 2015, p. 115), McGregor's book serves as evidence of the difficulties of a writer being present to receive and transfigure these processes if she must also enter into a meta-discourse about her process as it unfolds.

To return to the question of a methodology for writing in the academy, there is a key distinction to be made between process and method. To follow Uhlmann, process is what is contained in *A Novel Idea*; method is what is found in the novel itself. Both, though, encompass the writing, or in academic parlance, the practiced-based research. Sempert et al. (2017) recognise this in relation to the creative writing research degree, insofar as the authors observe that the creative and critical text need not sit side by side. They argue that the critical and creative texts "can work together, on the same page, methodology and output becoming one" (p. 219).

Webb has acknowledged the way in which writer-researchers "do not begin by completing the epistemological preliminaries and designing research but, as Carole Gray suggests, by engaging in practice: by sitting down and writing creative work" (2015, p. 277). Moreover, professional writers, again and again, reiterate the uncertainty inherit in their processes, along with the fact that the process is never the same for each writing task. For example, James Baldwin tells *The Paris Review* if there is any sort of insight to be generated from novel-writing, it comes after the novel is written. He states "The whole process of conception—one talks about it after the fact, if one discusses it at all. But you don't really understand it" (as cited in Gourevitch, 2007, p. 252). He says that a book starts for him with "something that irritates you and won't let you go. That's the anguish of it. Do this book or die. You have to go through that" (p. 256).

If well-established writers cannot methodologise their writing process from the beginning, or in retrospect, it is hardly fair that we would expect writers within the academy to be able to do so. Perhaps it is appropriate within the Higher Research Degree framework that the methodology for creative writing focuses on the exegetical framework, and whether the creative work can illuminate the exegesis, or vice versa. But established writers working within

the academy are, I think, in a different category. As the writers cited within this essay demonstrate, what these writers start with is an intention; within academic parlance, that "intention" perhaps correlates best with a research "aim".

Since writing is a form of research that poses its own research questions, the best paradigm for a methodology is not to pose a research question, which can then be answered by a well-defined methodology. The best a novelist can do, perhaps, is to indicate a topic, be it subject, thematic, stylistic or formal. That topic may entirely change, the style and form may be altered, but what is important is that there is a topic and that the writer has the intention of pursuing it. Moreover, the writer's aim in the writing should be to discover something new through the writing – though as Uhlmann neatly demonstrates, that aim may very often be as intangible as a "feeling". As Skains writes, the methodological process must account for the degree to which "serendipity" plays a role in practiced-based research (2018, p. 90). This approach need not trouble the question of accountability within the academy, since the writer's capacity to follow through with this intention may be assessed on their previous outputs (Aung Thin et al., 2020). Moreover, the final work and the drafts themselves evidence the methodology.

I will finish with an anecdote from Charlotte Wood's *The Luminous Solution*, where Wood reflects on whether the insights gained from her research into creativity, and her experience across writing six novels. Wood concludes that "in the end it doesn't help in the creation of new work" (2021, p. 40). This is a significant observation, in that a writer of Wood's stature is acknowledging here the lack of universality of the application of insights of her own practice-based research into writing to the process of producing new work. Nonetheless, Wood does not find this insight dispiriting, but rather concludes, "the value of a new work of art lies in its mysterious, irreplaceable nature. As so many writers have articulated, each book must be a never-before experienced creative problem" (p. 40).

As Wood explains, much of the difficulty in writing is not solving a problem but finding a problem that requires solving in the first place, which in itself entails writing. Here, Wood's idea matches closely to Uhlmann's sense of an intuitive truth – the writer starts with a feeling, a sense that there is a truth to be located and sets about her process in order to find a method to bring that truth into existence through the writing itself. What is clear from Wood's writing on the subject, and from the observations made by writers more generally, is their intention to "address a never-before experienced creative problem" (p. 40). But that problem itself may not be uncovered until well into the writing. In other research projects, it may be possible to state the original contribution to knowledge in advance, but writing is not a research activity that lends itself to such speculation.

The newness in the writing, its irreducible nature, is evidenced in the infinite aesthetic choices the writer makes during their process and the method is detectable in the writing. As Cheever explains, in "every sentence is an innovation" (as cited in Gourevitch, 2008, p. 157)– it is the writer's aim to find that particular relationship between subject, style and form that has never been discovered before, and to discover it in the experimentation that takes place as one is

writing. In this sense, methodology is both process and method, but even then, as *A Novel Idea* illustrates, that process might be as simple as turning up with an intention.

Conclusion

Overall, this essay argues that writing as a research activity has been underestimated within the academy and that the administrative requirements within the academy do not adequately reflect its nature. Consequently, the requirements on writers within the academy result in writers having to speculate on their processes both in advance of the undertaking and in providing a retrospective account.

The question of methodology in relation to the act of writing, and as distinct to the peripheral activities such as archival research, has limited application to novel writing in the sense that the writer often does not know what question they are addressing until they begin writing. Writing is a process that is thus self-generating in that the writing creates the questions which are then answered through further writing. Writing problematises traditional notions of methodology, in that the problems that will arise cannot necessarily be anticipated in advance. Writing is the methodology, in the sense that the writing itself determines the plan for the writing. While it might be possible to speculate about the possible aim in advance, at best, a writer can record their intention for the work but must also be prepared to depart from that intention if the writing deems it necessary.

Related to the question of methodology is the question of the exegetical explanation of the creative work, which in effect requires a retrospective methodological account. In applying Uhlmann's ideas in this regard, we can see that the output of writing – that is the work of literature – is a distinct mode of thinking. That is, literature is an understanding, a truth, and a form of knowing, and not simply the communication of the results of the act of practicing writing. As Uhlmann writes, "rather than seeing knowledge as fixed, a 'thing', we need to see it in terms of process: thinking not thought; knowing or understanding rather than knowledge" (2020, p. 209). Fiona McGregor's *A Novel Idea* neatly demonstrates the problem of the schism within the academy which requires the writer to both produce the work of fiction and provide a commentary on that process. Given the immensity of the task, as McGregor's book demonstrates, it is not possible to be present for the writing and to write a comprehensive account of that process at the same time. To require writers within the academy to attend to these tasks, and second guess their processes, may very well diminish the calibre of the writing produced within the academy to the impoverishment of both creative writing scholarship, and literary output.

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