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Wuthering

Abstract:

‘Wuthering’ represents a metafictional response to the themes of the conference by recontextualising Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* in two extracts from my novel, *The Women’s Pages*. It explores the process of creativity, and the way stories are shaped and fiction is formed. Rereading and reimagining rather than rewriting the text of *Wuthering Heights* asserts the creative power of the reader to invest desires and dreams with narrative life. The project commenced with the short story ‘The Sleepers in That Quiet Earth’ (the last but hardly final words of *Wuthering Heights*) and developed into a novel that references Brontë and her characters in overt as well as tangential ways. The contemporary story concerns a writer-by-accident whose fictional protagonist is named after Brontë’s pseudonym Ellis Bell. The narrative demonstrates the unpredictability of creativity and imagination and traverses the same thematic ground as *Wuthering Heights*: fractured families, dangerous love, irrational choices fuelled by passion, and the emotional gaps left by absent mothers. ‘Wuthering’ presents two sections of the novel demonstrating the metatextual relationship between artefacts that are separated by time and place but united via the act of reading. In the first section, from chapter 2, the contemporary character, Dove, reflects upon the power that *Wuthering Heights* has over her, and how the story she is writing has commenced with the death of her mother; the second section from chapter 12 shows Dove engaging with the author of *Wuthering Heights*, seeing as if in a dream Emily Brontë walking the moors on a mysterious errand, several months before her death.

Biographical note:

Debra Adelaide is Associate Professor in Creative Writing at the University of Technology Sydney. ‘Wuthering’ is an extract from her fourth novel, *The Women’s Pages*.

Keywords:

Artefact – Brontë – metafiction – rereading – *Wuthering Heights*

Chapter 2

It was reading that brought Dove to this. Reading that novel when she was a teenager, or whenever it was she had first read it, then again as a young woman, when she had underlined great slabs of the text in ink, for some reason she could not now remember, and then yet again to her mother as she lay in hospital dying – reading it had infected her imagination. It was like malaria of the brain, lying dormant then leaping at unexpected times to attack with the fever of unresolved narrative. And it would not depart until she had grappled with the confusion of gaps and shadowy images and half-truths – ones that were far more dominant and demanding than the scenes and the characters that she also saw with perfect, often frightening, clarity.

The novel had unfolded again and again to be something different every time, and she was sick of it because it meant there would never be a final reading of this book for her. Like that mosquito-borne tropical fever, it would never let her go. She had half a lifetime ahead of her, she was not yet forty, and this novel was going to torture her for the rest of her life. She would be close to death and it would still have its hooks into her. Doubtless even after death when she was good and buried with the soft wind breathing through the grass above her, not for her would there be peace. She would never be one of the sleepers in the quiet earth.

Nevertheless Dove bought the copy of *Wuthering Heights* that afternoon. It was impossible not to, even though she already had several copies at home. She had gone into town to buy a new coffee machine and ended up in Dymocks where the stand of Penguin Classics lured – no, taunted – her. And on the bus going home she re-read the first three chapters. By the time she got off and walked down the street and into her house, she felt as exhausted and benumbed as Lockwood, feeble as a kitten and wishing she had her own housekeeper to bring in supper and sit down with her while she ate it, and either animate or lull her to sleep with her talk.

Her mother had been a violin teacher, and when she was lying peaceful and close to death in hospital Dove had suggested some music, thinking she could bring in her iPod and feed it straight into her ears. But Jane had requested, murmuring, that she bring in *Wuthering Heights* and read it to her instead. And she wanted the old copy from her flat. When Dove found it she saw that it was stamped on the inside cover with the name of the girls' school past Bathurst where her mother had taught music nearly forty years ago, before she was born. Perhaps she had taught English as well, since the copy contained tiny slips with notes and pencilled annotations in the margins – her mother's discreet hand was nothing like her own bold underlinings and exclamation marks. *A novel without a reader?* went one neat comment on the half-title page. Another noted, *Imptc of narrative perspective. Self-conscious literary artefact.* On the facsimile reproduction of the 1847 title page, her mother had written next to the pseudonym Ellis Bell, *Distancing: Brontë/Bell/Lockwood/Nelly/etc.* As she leafed through it, catching the sweet dusty scent of its tea-coloured pages, a note fell out. *Chapt 16: C dies halfway through novel, it stated. Absent mother theme reinforced.*

Dove had almost sniffed at that, refusing to consider the obvious. Her mother wanted this book read to her and so she would read it to her. And what had happened was not

just that her mother had died with the sound of Emily Brontë's words quietly spoken into her ear, but that Dove had found a story, followed it, and was now firmly trapped within it.

Or so it felt. She was a graphic designer and thought in images, not words. She read the novel and saw scenes vividly. And even as she slept she saw people and events unfolding and, during the weeks in which she read the book to her mother, a character called Ellis and her story emerged with such clarity it became a compulsion for her to write. Before they had finished reading the book she had made notes and drafted out scenes in a purple notebook her mother had given her some time before she became ill. Writing late at nights after she returned from her hospital visits, or in the early hours of the day, she had not really stopped to question where the story was going or even why she – who had never before harboured a desire to write – was now gripped by a feverish, urgent need to find out what this story was about and where it would end.

As her mother's life had slowly ebbed away after her final debilitating stroke, Dove had been creating another narrative which started by describing an event in the life of Ellis, a young married woman travelling on a bus with her baby Charlie, to visit her father in Ashfield. She saw this powerfully, vividly, much of it unfolding before her like a film. She saw clearly the suburb of Ashfield and knew it was the late 1960s, and caught a strong sensual impression of the place: the smells from the gardens, from the kitchens, on that particular day. All this was so strong that Dove wondered if she had ever lived in a house similar to Ellis's father's house, back before she could remember. It was a Federation place with a front garden featuring an old wire gate and a fence covered in plumbago. A tessellated path led up to the front verandah. There were houses and gardens like this in Ashfield still, she knew, because she'd been there recently, researching for the story.

In one way the story began simply: Ellis was making a regular weekly visit to her father who lived alone, and she was taking the bus because she did not drive, not uncommon for women back then. Nothing much happened. Some elderly women on the bus disapproved of the fact that the baby was underdressed, despite the heat of the day, and was not wearing his hat. The most momentous thing was when Ellis placed Charlie down on the path at her father's house and he took his first steps.

It was while Dove was writing this part of the story that her mother began to die. She was quickly writing this section down on her laptop, seated by her mother's bed, when she heard the unmistakable noises heralding imminent death, the labour of breath. At the same time she realised two things: it was the reading aloud of the novel that had helped her understand it better, and that this had somehow inspired the story she was writing. And she understood nothing more than that, but in any case why would she? She had more important things to contend with: her mother, who had been so quiet for weeks, was now breathing louder and louder, desperate to grasp hold of some final moments of life, as the dying often do.

Chapter 12

Dove saw a woman in a long skirt striding across a dark landscape. It was not snowing, though maybe it would be in another month. It was still autumn, though very cold. The woman walked past the last of her father's crop of beans, the leaves already turning brown. The beans themselves would be tough but there might be another meal or two from them. The sky was still and dark grey. Up this high, no impediment of rock or tree between the ground and the earth, the sky looked close enough to touch. On bright days it looked so brittle you could almost punch through to heaven. This morning the sky was elusive, with only a hint of light loitering over the rise to her right.

The woman stepped over the low dry-stone wall and onto the path of crushed pebble and slate, a half-hearted thing that trickled across the next field, its boundary marked by a hedge of furze nibbled down by sheep. She stepped over this too, hitching her grey wool skirt, then dropping it again to keep striding across the knobbly hill that was littered with flat wet stones. Underfoot she felt it slick and icy, even through her boots. She'd brought her father's trowel, the one he kept for tending the beans, sometimes cabbages and parsnips, which were all that would grow in the windy patch behind the house. He should have kept a kitchen garden in the graveyard next door to the church, where there was more shelter.

She felt the crunch of dry heather underfoot, a few sprigs someone had collected earlier and then dropped. She bent and gathered them up. That someone may even have been her. It must have been, for who else was there? She fingered their spiky buds, the tight little heads. Faded purple. Not quite purple: creamy pink. There was a faint scent still. She tucked them into her pocket and kept walking, bundling her shawl tighter, a thick one she had knitted herself, though it was still not nearly protection enough with the wind snapping like a rabid dog.

She had made sure that Keeper remained on his chain, as he would only be a nuisance now. Today she did not want his rough comfort, the nudge of his nose against her skirt. That look in his eye. How dogs managed to judge by the faintest turn of their eyeballs, with just enough white to show that they knew what you were doing, or were thinking of doing. A sniff. Raising their muzzle then replacing it on their paws a quarter inch to the left or the right. Sighing. Then glancing again, displaying another sliver of white.

No, she wouldn't have it. Keeper had whined then settled down again on his sack beside the kitchen door. She'd given him a scone left over from yesterday's tea. Not hungry herself.

Over the next rise the pebble and slate path gave way to a thin track flattened into the grasses by years of walks, easy to follow in full daylight, but by then she would be returning. To either side the landscape vanished into the gloom, flat grey stones and stubby tufts of grass and hillocks embraced by bracken that was so dark green it looked black, looming and receding as she continued her walk, head down, arms tightly held around herself. There to her left was the stand of stones, three enormous charcoal grey ones, piled together. A giant's pile: two large, with a smaller on top.

Three potatoes set to the side of a plate. Three pears or apples in a bowl. Three dumplings. A gravy of green moss down the western side of the bottom two.

She shook her head, clearing her mind. The walk there and back took most people three hours, but she could normally do it in two with her long strides. Another reason she preferred to walk out on her own: no one else could ever keep up. To her right, a faint brush of lighter grey hinting at the dawn. And then another pile of stones, this time surrounded by crumbs of rocks. How they got there was anyone's guess. There were no mountains nearby to fall down, no cliffs to break off and tumble down to land and settle. This was the mountain, up here, this was as high as it could get. It was as if a heavenly being had opened up the skies and flung out a scuttleload of rocks onto the earth. The hill sloped down again soon, after the dumpling-pear-potato rocks. Up here, the landscape was immutable. It embraced her and propelled her along, up and down the rise where there was no other living creature but the wild wolf force that gnashed and howled in never-ending fury.

In the end it was always the wind that sent her home. Everything else, the vast bare immensity of the stripped land that met the unclothed sky, she could lose herself in, forever. Her cheeks were permanently stained red now, from a lifetime of the biting wind, her lips cracked and white.

Not even the cold itself bothered her. When the wind stilled, no matter how frozen the world, the cold was something she learned to embrace, though now she tucked the trowel into her sleeve and pulled the shawl closer over the bundle, bending her head against the fury screaming around her head. Her ears burned. She should have worn a bonnet instead of the shawl which she had pulled over her head, not that it would have helped that much. Useless things, bonnets. Sometimes she wore her father's old leather hat, when no one else was around to care. She almost laughed. No one else was around. It was just her, the cold earth deep below, the sky pressing down.

She crossed the waterfall as the eastern light was glinting on the rocks and the wind was dropping, as if to convince the dawn it had been asleep and tame all through the cold night. Further up, she disturbed a family of plovers sheltering in a nest of heather, the muffled slapping of their wings briefly cutting across the silence. By the time she reached Top Withins, morning had properly arrived. One black-faced sheep trotted across her path, barely pausing to throw a lugubrious glance her way. She strode up the track straight behind the ruined house where two gaunt thorn trees stretched their limbs, as if craving alms of the sun.

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Dove sat upright. She looked at the pen which had fallen on the blanket, the purple notebook in which she hadn't written for ages but which she still kept on the bedside table. She had no idea if she had been asleep and dreaming, or writing in some sort of trance. But there were the words on the page beside her, the final ones in her own handwriting those of Emily Brontë herself. Either she was still dreaming, or she truly had been writing in her sleep. Or she was going mad.

Certainly her heart was beating like mad. She had never been to Haworth, never walked across those fabled moors behind the parsonage. But she felt chilled to the

marrow, as cold as Emily herself out on that lonely walk in the early hours of the morning. And the scene had not finished writing itself. Now she was outside the scene rather than right there in it but it was as lucid as before, perhaps even more so. Indeed as she watched what the author of *Wuthering Heights* did next she felt that the clarity might be too painful to bear.

Emily unwrapped her shawl and flung it on the yellow grass beside her. She took out the trowel and a small parcel, something wrapped in calico. She started digging beside the thorn trees where a clump of late blue columbines was still in bloom, their heads dancing like bells. She eased them aside and began scraping away into the mossy turf, then jabbing into the damp earth. A few inches down and the soil became stony, for the whole place was on a knoll, the ruins of the house like an extension of the natural boulders tossed around it. Emily leaned back on her heels and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead then over the smooth brown hair, gathered into a tight knot.

She was left-handed, Dove noticed, but she passed the trowel to her other hand to keep attacking the soil, striking it deeper and deeper until it disappeared below the surface of the earth. She swapped hands again, lifting the trowel up to drop the soil into a neat pile. Finally she laid the trowel down and picked up the parcel. Dove paid very close attention but could not discern what it might be. It was small and flat, but wrapped in layers to disguise the shape. Emily raised it to her chest and held it there for a moment with her eyes closed, then leaned forward and, in a slow and gentle manner, in contrast to her near frenzied digging, laid the precious thing in the hole she had made. Then she looked around, as if expecting there might be a witness, though who might possibly appear on this bleak early morning in late autumn, Dove could not imagine.

Quickly she replaced the soil, scraping it across with the trowel, then scattered pebbles and pulled at the spongy moss to cover the spot. In moments it was all done and she was slapping her hands to remove traces of dirt, then rising from her knees with the shawl and the trowel.

As she began to walk away the wind picked up again, and she turned and faced the tiny grave, for there was no other word for it, and stood with her head bowed, pulling the shawl tight over her head. As an afterthought, she bent and plucked a few of the columbines, then she turned to walk back down the hill to the south. Before she disappeared, Dove heard for the first time something other than the whistling of the wind in the two lonely thorn trees: she heard Emily Brontë cough.

Research Statement

Research background

This project sits in the 1904 Creative Writing category. April Lindner's *Catherine* retells *Wuthering Heights* as a commercial contemporary romance; Jasper Fforde satirises the main characters and themes of *Wuthering Heights* in two of his novels; Alice Hoffman writes a contemporary version of *Wuthering Heights* in *Here on Earth*, which focuses on the central love story. I have always been fascinated by this

novel. The research question is, can the process of writing a response to *Wuthering Heights* explain to myself and to readers my relationship with this novel?

Research contribution

The Women's Pages argues that *Wuthering Heights* transcends its reputation as a romance story. It repudiates the idea that its principal characters have centrality and agency. It reveals that the central concern of *Wuthering Heights* is not with character nor with theme but with the nature of storytelling itself. This discovery is written as a novel within a novel, in which a contemporary character is so creatively 'haunted' by this precursor text and by its author, Emily Brontë, that she writes her own novel and creates her own life.

Research significance

The novel is published by Picador Australia and has been reviewed in the *Guardian* ('tender, wise and extraordinary reading') and the *Monthly* ('addresses eternal issues in a fresh and uniquely Australian way'); it has been selected for discussion at all the major Australian literary festivals. It has been longlisted for the 2016 Stella Prize.