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Fanning hallucinations in Murray Bail's hall of mirrors

Abstract:

Art generates what Elizabeth Grosz (2012) calls, via Deleuze, sensations and intensities. High passion can generate hallucinatory experiences. Hallucinatory experiences are a ghosting resonance, or residual, of the real. Writing itself has been claimed by Alan Bennett (2005), British playwright, to be prescient, calling into being what has not yet been. This piece of creative nonfiction charts such experiences coming out of my fandom – what Lawrence Grossberg (2006) terms an ‘affective investment’ – for the Australian writer Murray Bail. I use the term ‘fan’ in a ludic and irreverent fashion, given Bail's high modernism and his reputed reclusiveness in the face of celebrity-making. *Harriet Chandler: A Novella* (2014) is my writing back to his 1987 novel, *Holden's Performance*, via that minor character. I have researched his archive in the National Library of Australia. The archive itself, although seemingly providing empirical data, is alive with becoming fiction, partly arising from my affect-influenced reading. Bail, thus, himself, becomes a less material entity when supposedly available to be known through the archive.

Biographical note:

Moya Costello teaches creative writing in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University. She has been awarded state and federal writer's grants, residencies and a fellowship; and judged many competitions including the SA Premier's nonfiction prize for Adelaide Writers' Week when she was on the Writer's Week committee. She has appeared at the Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Bellingen, Gold Coast and Yamba writers' festivals. She has two collections of short creative prose (*Kites in Jakarta; Small Ecstasies*) and two novellas (*The Office as a Boat: A Chronicle; Harriet Chandler: A Novella*). Her work is in many scholarly and literary journals and anthologies.

Keywords:

Murray Bail – archive – letters – fandom – intertextuality

Murray Bail, an Australian writer, is – has always been – a figure in my head, a fiction of who he is. He is a dirigible, as, from the encounter with his work and then his archive, I inflate an/other narrative. I could be a 'fan' but for the literary/high art context. Thus, the authorial name 'Murray Bail' floats freely as a signifier, unanchored to the man himself, like an anonymous space-suited astronaut set loose from the spacecraft's safety tethers, circulating out among swirling stars.

My fandom for Bail – what cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg calls an 'affective investment' – was a slow burn, from reading his work, conducting a radio interview with him, to formal study, culminating in a PhD fictional biography of Harriet Chandler, a minor character in Bail's 1987 novel, *Holden's performance*, his second novel. I consciously chose the term 'fan' as a ludic and irreverent but essentially benign intersection with the high modernism of Bail who is immured in the other-worldly sense of the self as artist. But fan is not an exceptional term in the correspondence in the Bail archive. Alice Adams, the American writer, wrote to Bail telling him that American editor Pat Strachan was a 'big fan' of his; David Malouf that 'Liz' (I assume this is Elizabeth Harrower) was 'quite a fan'; while Salman Rushdie confessed to his 'first ever fan letter' to Patrick White, which he asked Bail to send on.

Art generates what Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz calls, via French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, sensations and intensities. Affect materialises in the body; high passion can cause hallucinatory experiences – ghosting resonances or residuals of the real.

In fandom, you enter a Bureau de Change, lending your body to a text, the space of fandom being a crossing-over, a border space, for texts and selves. As I approached the monolith that is the National Library of Australia in Canberra, the nation's capital, my imagination was already inflamed. I knew that my activities would be fuelled by flagrant desire. I envisioned the archive boxes pulsating with intimacies and secrets, as, indeed, the institutions – the Library, National Portrait Gallery (containing Fred Williams' portrait of Bail) and National Gallery (Bail was a trustee) – five-minutes' walk from each other, set up their own ectoplasmic field of attraction for this fan towards her celeb manqué, Bail being famously shy and reticent. (In her interview with Bail about his fourth novel, *The pages*, Australian journalist Susan Wyndham noted that hers was the only interview he was giving; however, despite being singular, one interview *is an interview*.)

I initially went to the archive as empirical presence, immanent materialism, but the archive immediately liquefied. It is determinedly undisciplined: it bleeds relentlessly the borders of genre, speculating on genre-identity within its own diverse portfolio. The archive is alive with becoming fiction; fiction invades it, unstoppable, all-pervasive. The archive shimmered in transcendence, becoming sublime, driven by mounting affect and ballooning desire.

For the archive itself is a *constructed* portrait. The writer as archivist presumably isn't casual, selecting material-to-be-archived with care to deliberately shape a self-portrait. Authors may wish to, or imagine that they can, control the archive. For example, in Bail's archive, the correspondence from Australian writer Helen Garner, his former

wife, is not available for many years. Nevertheless, in a piece of Bail's short fiction, 'The seduction of my sister', the narrator, after throwing numerous objects away to his neighbour, including his own sister, admits gormlessly to being 'casual about possessions'. The archive, then, synergises with the fiction, influencing a reader's interpretation of both.

But contestations over the interpretation of an archive, particularly of a living author, are as unavoidable as contrasting interpretations of any text. For example, the American short-story writer, Alice Munro, became, according to scholar Robert McGill, contestatory, if not litigious, over the re-presentations of a doctoral student's research into Munro's archives at the University of Calgary. According to McGill, Munro claimed that letters in the archive had been misinterpreted and she subsequently banned the student from quoting the letters.

The correspondence about *Eucalyptus*, Bail's third novel, is an example of the archive's genre-bending. The letters, from fans, could be read as Bail-created fictions, becoming-fictional-texts about Bail's fictional text. I imagined Bail as the narrator of his short story, 'Life of the party', up a eucalypt tree, spying on his own party that he never attends, and me beneath him on a lower limb, a strictly eunuch-like observer, an observer manqué. On the surface a story about a bar-b-cue in a suburban street of white, middle Australia, it could nevertheless be about the omniscient but inevitably intrusive and controlling narrator embodied in 'Murray Bail', a less-than-malevolent but not entirely benign spectre. And I practically hallucinated Bail writing this correspondence himself, in fictional mode, and sending it on to the archive as fact.

For a number of male *Eucalyptus* correspondents are like the suitors in the novel, 'specialists in botany and forestry'. They could be incarnations of Holland, the father in the novel, who prepares to give away his daughter in a gum-naming competition, or the dark Mr Cave who looks, frighteningly, to be the successful suitor.

Facts ('brief assertions', 'blocks of matter', according to the narrator of *Eucalyptus*) are laid on the table by these incarnates: Addis Ababa was renamed by Emperor Menelik II after the newly introduced eucalypts; less than 1% of Blue Gum forest remains in Sydney; a friend was a great tree planter on a scale to eclipse even Bail's Mr Holland; when most people were chopping down native trees, a set of parents were far ahead of their time, planting eucalypts from all over Australia.

Contestations occur: over naming: Was the chapter on *E camaldulensis* poetic licence? Did Bail know that *E camaldulensis* is actually *E rostrata*, renamed by Frederick Dehnhardt, a gardener at Camalduli, Italy? Over species boundaries: Holland was wrong about wattles: Did he ever think of branching off into the almost eucalypt-like Turpentine and Angophora? Over suitable reference works: Bail might be interested in a correspondent's book, *Eucalypts*. Over originality: the story bears an uncanny resemblance to one of a wondering warrior chancing upon a bush princess, but starting on an extinct volcano and featuring fauna not flora.

Requests are solicited and questions asked: Had Bail any contact with the surveying profession and if so could he forward such information which would only be used in non-remunerative talks or papers for surveyors? Alternative stories are told: in Western Australia's Corunna Downs WWII aerodrome, *E rameliana* were planted as a

windbreak, but an American pilot's plane clipped the gums, burnt into flames, and the pilot was buried in Arlington where a lone *E rameliana* grows because the heat from the crash caused regeneration of a seed pod unknowingly deposited with the pilot's remains.

A female admirer, a representative of the Literature Section of the Woman's Club of Washington University of St Louis ('many of us are faculty wives'), is reminiscent of the novel's Sprunt sisters, or the butcher's wife, the postmistress, a Kearney, a Gulley or a Kelly.

Many correspondents have carefully chosen post-cards in an evocation of an image of their recipient. A number in the *Eucalyptus* correspondence feature, naturally, trees. American poet Mark Strand could have been channelling an image of the maturing Ellen of *Eucalyptus* when he sent a Balthus postcard, *The room 1947-48*, ten years before that novel's publication. Having selected *Poverty Motors Periora, Illinois* by John Margolies, Strand wrote that he 'saw this and thought of you', perhaps because of Bail's short story 'Healing' which features a bicycle accident and a service station, or because he'd read about the car mechanics of *Holden's performance*. Other postcards feature portraits: the head of an Aztec Eagle Warrior, a Rembrandt self-portrait, Signorelli's portrait of Dante, van Dyck's of Cornelius Van der Geest. These images have a vibratile relationship with Bail as author, as his first book, a collection of short stories, was *Contemporary portraits*. Van der Geest was a merchant of spice; one correspondent was informed by Bail's mother that her son's books 'had a few naughty bits' in them. Australian ex-pat writer, Shirley Hazzard, perhaps had Bail's Australian situatedness in mind when she sent a John Gould postcard of a kingfisher, and another of Cezanne's *Fields at Bellevue*. Sydney's Bellevue Hill has been within the geography of home for Bail, and *Eucalyptus* mentions both it and Cezanne in different contexts. One fan sent unsolicited images for *Eucalyptus* – some too pornographic for the post, according to Bail's British publisher, Harvill. The two images in the archive are of a young woman, meant to stand in for Ellen, naked underneath a sheer but patterned sheath of a dress. Her voluptuous breasts are visible but her vulva is demurely covered by her hand. She is too deliberate, too knowing, indeed too mature to be Ellen.

But things were also moving in the opposite direction in the correspondence: Bail's fictitious characters crossed-over and made appearances in the real world. Douglas Huebler, the American conceptual artist, is the standout figure in this hall of mirrors. Bail's fiction is a fun-house, its interior décor a maze of jokes and iterative references. Huebler wrote that, among the stories in *Contemporary portraits*, he was 'most partial to the Huebler story' about a photographic project of a Douglas Huebler.

The portrait of Bail constructed by his archive is that of one operating in a literary stratosphere: he knows and is or was known by Patrick White, Shirley Hazzard, Bruce Chatwin, David Malouf, et al. 'Only the greatest novelist in Australia!' the New Zealand novelist Lloyd Jones 'shouted over the phone' to a friend, and subsequent Bail correspondent, to whom Jones had recommended *Eucalyptus*.

The correspondence to and from Bail adds to the now fulsome evidence in edited collections of writers' letters and texts on writers' friendships that writers create

networks, generating mutual support. *Holden's performance* got Chatwin through 'dismal days'. When Anita Brookner heard *Eucalyptus* being read on radio, she wrote to Bail, saying it was 'marvellous'. Australian novelist David Foster's postcard of congratulations is a striking moment in the *Eucalyptus* correspondence for its aching expression of vulnerability. Here two men in the Australian literary canon speak of artistic doubt. Bail had won the Miles Franklin Award for the novel, and Foster congratulated him, noting that '[t]hey took their time to get around' to them both. '[B]ut better late than never.' 'Hope the recognition gives you the heart to carry on.'

To read archived correspondence is to be enthralled, to be enmeshed in a world much beyond the self. Erica Hazlehurst, a philosopher in *The pages*, who would 'rifle through' the philosopher-manqué protagonist Wesley Anthill's handwritten work, has a similar reaction: 'It was a privilege to be allowed into the mind of another person, the life work of another. She was curious to see what he had thought, what he had found. Already she respected his effort.'

I did start talking, in private conversations, about what I'd discovered, about what, most probably, I couldn't write about, or incarnate via the word, such as a writer being relentlessly scathing about, one, publishers, and, two, a former lover/partner who is also a writer. For those conversations are a kind of gossip, or would be, except that it all comes from what I think of as facts, documentary evidence – letters, postcards – in the archive. But I also felt presumptuous, as, later, Erica Hazlehurst did. So I felt inhibition, reluctance, because of embarrassment, and considered leaving the correspondence to itself, to another unlike myself. Indeed Bail's own letter in the David Marr correspondence, congratulating Marr on his biography of Patrick White, is a projection, a message-in-a bottle to the future: 'The important figure attracts the quality biographer'. Surely this is a warning to a phantasm, a spectral biographer-yet-to-be.

Despite being a figure in my head, I have met Bail in person, having interaccessed him for radio and being a member of a small luncheon in his honour. I have been in his physical presence at a festival and in symposia. Wyndham has acutely described him as a combination of 'urban dude and downcast Eeyore'. Fred Williams' painted portrait is of a seemingly would-be style-icon, a weed-like, even nerdish figure channelling, albeit eighteen years before the publication of *The pages*, Wesley Anthill or the way this reader imagines him to be. In the two strikingly intimate, suave, darkly handsome photographic portraits of Bail in the archive, by Jacqueline Mitelman and Elizabeth Gilliam, he presents as a young intellectual Elvis Presley and older disgruntled Patrick White respectively. He has the same closed lips in both: a man of few but sharp words. Oh, but you want those words, and you don't want those words to be sharp with you.

Nadine Gordimer, the white South African writer, has said that there is more truth in her fiction than her essays. But biography and autobiography interpret. In *Harriet Chandler: A novella*, I wrote:

Biographical subjects can be private people who leave little documentation for the biographer to write their history. Biographers say it would be easier if their subjects were fictional. Fiction writers have imagination and facts available to them. Facts can

be more troubling than fiction: problems with certainty, proof and interpretation. So biographers speculate too. If there is little to pillage then there is more to make up; what can't be found can be imagined.

Writing is strangely, even frighteningly prescient. British playwright Alan Bennett has claimed prescience for imaginative writing specifically. Again, in *Harriet Chandler*, I wrote: 'Words bring things into existence, into being from the shadow behind them, like a ship in mist sounding the depth'. In an article in *Outskirts* journal, I wrote the following: '[i]n writing and reading, we are captured and transported in alien abduction. You can call down death upon someone. You can call up someone into being'.

Formulating intertextuality, Australian cultural theorist John Frow has written that texts, while bringing something new into being, do this by assembling 'a patchwork of traces' of otherness. I have written in *TEXT* that *Harriet Chandler* is one use made by one readership of *Holden's performance*, and, thereby, it constitutes part of the afterlife of that novel. But only if we think of time as linear and unidirectional. In an essay entitled 'Karmic traces', Eliot Weinberger quotes a seventeenth-century Chinese critic, Yeh Hsieh, saying: 'When I write something different from former masters, I may be filling in something missing from their work. Or is it possible that the former masters are filling in something missing in my work'.

Patrick White haunts *Holden's performance*, especially in the novel's sense of the notion of 'the Great Australian Emptiness'. In Bail's novel, characters are nominatively determined – for example, Alex Screech is a speech-giver and Holden is a mechanical being, unthinking and unfeeling. In *Harriet Chandler*, I play with Chandler's name, suggesting a range of sources including a (failed) anagram of Patrick White's characters' names – Hurtle, Courtney, Rhoda, Duffield – from his novel, *The vivisector*, since Harriet's body is, like a character in White's novel, affected by disease.

Alex Screech has something more to do with my PhD. When I was delivering my PhD thesis to the University of Adelaide for examination, I saw a Citroën Deux Chevaux pass in front of me as I prepared to cross one of the main arterial roads of Adelaide's city centre. Screech drove a Citroën, and I imagined it to be a Deux Chevaux, since it suited his character and profession. The Deux Chevaux was a transporter and run-about (for Alex's newsreels that he screened in his Manly Epic theatre). Seeing a Deux Chevaux in any Australian city, let alone the smaller one of Adelaide, was, I deemed, unusual. Very unusual. So unusual that I now think of it, over a decade later, as an hallucination. A PhD, while sharing the same strange intensity of one's first undergraduate degree, has inevitably heightened intensity because of its individual journey.

My PhD initially went online as part of the newly minted Australian Digital Theses project. One night, as I sat watching television, my partner came in to say that my invention, a nominatively determined friend of Harriet Chandler, had emailed me. Naturally I thought it was joke. But the name had emailed me, because formerly, before my PhD went online, she was the only person with that name appearing on the web. Now, with my online PhD, there was a second. Moreover, the email-sender said

I had stolen her student information from the university I worked for where my email-sender was a student. My character was a visual artist, as was Harriet Chandler. My email-sender was a visual artist. My email-sender threatened litigation.

I decided not to respond in the heat of the moment. In fact I waited twelve months before I emailed back, in the meantime scaring the University, who took my thesis off the web and its library shelf, and me contacting Arts Law.

I eventually changed the name of the character, claiming only aesthetic reasoning and not because of any guilt around using a stolen name. I emailed my email-sender of this change.

One day, in the depths of the library of the University where I had found work, a young woman came up to me. She was now working in the University's library and had recognised me from my staff photo. It was my email-sender. We talked agreeably. She looked not like my imagined friend of Harriet Chandler, but Harriet Chandler herself, or what we know of what she looked like. At this moment I thought I had seen a 2CV on that Adelaide arterial road, and, later, I could easily believe that Bail had written his own *Eucalyptus* correspondence, and that I was up a tree with him on a lower branch of that eucalypt in 'Life of the party'.

The fan thinks of herself as canny: shrewd or knowing. But the uncanny is surely not far from the thoughts of the celebrity, precursor or master – the fan threatening to contaminate boundaries, to breach limits, undermining identity with the introduction of a foreign body, a *doppelänger*. The obsessively neurotic, the unhinged, is the flickering, unsettled, unpredictable mode of the cursor. The precursor, by contrast, is sane, civilised – the innocently stalked, not the culpable and cursed stalker. Cursor comes from the Latin, runner. Flickering and shifting, the computer cursor is characterised by movement and mutation. Likewise, within intertextuality the uncanny lurks: strange attractors are born; synchronicities develop; the stable is bound to its opposite, the unhinged; chance mutates into the predetermined – though Graham Allen, an Australian theorist of intertextuality, claims that intertextuality is also about the rational and the civil: 'relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence'.

Bail's work is mythic; he becomes a mythic figure. In a body of creative work or oeuvre, it is common to see a style established and themes repeated. This is to ascribe to oeuvre an unexceptional and unsurprising mode of operation. But this mode of operation can also be characterised as something more extreme: obsessive, too, for example. Bail's obsession is the Anglo-Saxon Australian male born before or at the time of WWII. And to cite just one more of many possible examples: Geordie Williamson, senior *Weekend Australian* book reviewer, said of Australian writer Gerald Murnane, when reviewing Murnane's *Barley patch*, that he obsessively returns 'to particular landscapes, subjects, details or events'. And while Williamson says this obsessive activity is not evidence of eccentricity but of 'carefully calibrated choice', nevertheless the 'reiterations polish reality's objects to a mythic sheen'.

Finally, I want to relate one more case of obsession, and a case of intertextuality and the uncanny, a parallel story to mine with Bail, a *doppelänger* story: it is the Australian painter Davida Allen's one-time obsession with the New Zealand actor Sam Neill. I came across her obsession either through a portrait of Neill, or because

we talked when I met her at the New South Wales Writers' House, Varuna, during a writer's residency there. I returned to Allen's autobiographical novel *The autobiography of Vicki Myers*.

In a scene in the film *The piano*, Sam Neill is a voyeur in a hole in the wall to the coupling of Ada (Holly Hunter) and Baines (Harvey Keitel). It's a difficult scene to forget. As Australian novelist and academic, Gail Jones, writes, in a monograph entitled *The piano*, Stewart (Sam Neill), and husband of Ada, spies on the lovers through the wooden slats of Baines's hut:

and is unable to pull himself away ... it renders him foolish. Passive, arrested, shocked and immobilised, Stewart is fascinated but impotent, mesmerised but unable to act or intervene. He later lies beneath the house to watch through the floorboards, and one of Ada's jacket buttons loosens as she dresses and rolls through the cracks to fall onto his neck ... something beyond the screen almost hits him in the eye, something that ought to be beyond vision is materialised, and the audience's sense of viewing positions – and of our own voyeurism – is suddenly made circumspect.

The film was released in 1993. When I picked up Allen's novel again (published in 1991), I found the following. Vicki, the protagonist, is painting a portrait of the Movie Man (Sam Neill), while he is making a film. But up comes the filming of a sex scene. The Movie Man does not want Vicki on the set for the filming. 'It's hard enough doing the sex scene without having someone like Vicki in the same room', he says. Previously in the novel, Vicki has described the artist as a vulture, and herself as an obsessive, a nervous wreck, a pathetic and dribbling idiot and a lovesick fan. But at this contretemps, she screams, 'I am an artist ... an impartial observer. I could drill a peephole in the wall and you'd never know I was watching'. Further, Vicki says that having been into the Movie Man's studio, the film set, and painted his portrait, it would be 'the most logical thing' for him to walk out of her studio believing he could paint her portrait.

In *Footsteps*, the British biographer Richard Holmes wrote that the conscious identification with the biographical subject is 'pre-biographic', a 'primitive' form of hero-worship, and that part of the biographical process is the creation of a fictional or imaginary relationship with the subject – fictional, because the subject, being dead, could not talk back. But equally, reading the archived correspondence is an experience of the virtual: an imagined, affective space. For the thing you are aware of in the archive is the absence of the author, even though, in my case, he is still alive (as I write this paper).

Going to the archive was a confirmation of my fandom. I had been in the National Library for a sustained period, poring over the Bail archives, reading letters to this iconic, and iconoclastic, Australian writer, and a young librarian recognised the dual intensities of allure and immersion. By the time I ordered the Library's two photographic portraits of Bail, it was clear to the savvy librarian that I was a Bail fan. 'Here's Murray,' he said, dropping the photographs in front of me. This is despite Bail faulting of photography in his fiction. In *The pages*, for example, Anthill despises photography because it 'wasn't true enough', yet rendered what could be seen, and perhaps what could not.

Research statement

Research background

Murray Bail is an Australian author in the Australian literary canon. I have read correspondence to him in his own archive and some letters he has sent to others, in their archive. What kind of portrait of Bail and his contemporaries and their historical time is revealed by the archive? What kind of phenomenon is a literary archive? I am, in a sense, a 'fan' of Bail's. What kinds of affects and effects does fandom of a literary figure generate?

Research contribution

No work has been published on Murray Bail's archive from the National Library of Australia. My research will be the first. It produces new knowledge on Bail, his Australian and international contemporaries, and contributes to the knowledge about the literary archive. This essay also considers the oddity of *hommage* as fandom in a literary context and its compounding affects and effects. Part of such a fandom is life writing and, in my case, intertextuality as well.

Research significance

Creative nonfiction, including life writing, has been a burgeoning genre in the late twentieth century into the present. Biography as a genre is always morphing through experimental techniques. This is a work of creative nonfiction. My (2004) PhD was about Murray Bail and intertextuality. I (2005) have had a paper on experimental writing, of which intertextuality is a strategy, published in *TEXT*, an ERA A-ranked, double-blind refereed journal; had life writing (Costello and Costello 2013) as creative nonfiction co-written and published in the *Griffith Review*; co-edited (Costello et al 2013) a Special Issue of *TEXT* on experimental writing, and one on creative writing as research (2015); presented in the first Experimentalities symposium held at the University of Adelaide in 2015; published (2008) a review of Bail's (2008) novel, *The pages*, and had an article on my (2007) intertextual writing with his work in *TEXT*. There has been a review (van Loon 2015) of my (2014) novella, *Harriet Chandler*, intertextual with Bail's (1987) novel, *Holden's performance*, published in *TEXT* and another in the *Sydney Review of Books* (Jose 2016).

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