

Sandra Burr

Creative connections: The essay in the context of the creative PhD

Abstract: When Inga Clendinnen suggests in the preface to Agamemnon's Kiss that essays should not preach, teach, exhort or declare she joins an honourable society of essay writers who feel curiously compelled to define, explain and justify their chosen genre. The essay is variously regarded as an exquisite art form, an opportunity for reflective rumination or an invitation to join in conversation. While resistant to simple categorisation, the essay form is all these things ... and is ... much more.

The possibilities of essaying in a creative PhD are discussed in the context of the author's own research looking at the bond between women and horses. Parallels are drawn between aspects of horse training, creative practice and essay writing as alternative approaches to the production of a creative PhD are examined. The author describes the multiple roles performed by the essays in her own inherently organic dissertation, not only as the creative component of the research, but also as the connective path between the exegesis and the creative work and the author and her audience. Essayists including Montaigne, Adorno, Huxley, Joeres, Clendinnen and Dessaix are consulted.

Keywords:

Creativity – Creative led practice – Essays – Exegesis

Biographical note:

Sandra Burr is a PhD candidate in the School of Creative Writing, University of Canberra. She is researching the relationship between women and their horses.

Most creative research projects spring from passion. My passion is horses. My many years of equine immersion have resulted in the evolution of a personal practice and ethics of horsemanship that infuses every aspect of my life including, I have discovered since embarking on this PhD, my creative practice. My philosophy towards both horsemanship and creative practice is essentially integrated and holistic and is further characterised by patience, open-mindedness, a certain dogged determination, a willingness to be experimental and optimism. While ever mindful of the academic requirements of my PhD candidature my horse-inflected creative practice often allows me to see things from unconventional angles. While this occasionally leads to bouts of academic performance anxiety, removing the blinkers of convention has opened new pathways resulting in enhanced creativity and freedom of thought.

I began my PhD research with only vague ideas about the style, format or even the content of the creative work. My main concern was to gather information about Australian horsewomen and it seemed logical to use the exegesis as a repository for the data and as the locus for their voices. I viewed the exegesis not so much a place to theorise about the process of writing, but as a place to forge an understanding of the horse/woman bond. I envisaged it functioning as a forum for reportage and interpretation, a place to declare ‘this is what I have discovered about horsewomen and this is what I think it means’. I also planned to employ the exegesis in more conventional ways, using it to explain academic and methodological aspects of the project as well as a place to introduce the creative component of the dissertation – whatever that turned out to be. Even at this early stage without any firm ideas for the creative outcome, I was beginning to think of the dissertation as an organic and integrated work. Instead of accepting the artificial boundaries of form and function, i.e. exegesis and creative work, I wanted to blur the edges envisaging a circular fusion as each separate part fed into and reached backwards to the other. Although still uncertain about how to glue it together, I suspected that the answer would be revealed when the issues about the creative work were resolved.

Regardless of the aspirations researchers may hold for their final dissertations, there are a number of issues common to most creative research endeavours that require resolution. Sometimes, for instance, the passion that informs many creative projects leads to confusion about the relationship of the researcher to the research. It is generally agreed that in cultural research practice researchers are integral to and active within their research (Dally et al 2004, Radway 2005, Saukko 2003). Embedded researchers who are present within the community they are investigating often find themselves straddling both sides of their study – looking out and looking in – and I found that being both the object and subject of my research was confronting. My voice seemed to be everywhere, constantly leaking into places where I felt it should not be. In my multiple roles as project designer, questionnaire constructor, focus group leader, interviewer, data compiler and interpreter as well as the creative force driving the research, I constantly questioned how much of the findings reflected my voice and how much could be genuinely attributed to the horsewomen. I solved this paradox by anchoring my creative practice to my model of horsemanship.

As a horse owner I accept that I am both subjective and objective. I am responsible for my horse’s mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. I decide how she will be kept, when to visit her, when and where I will ride her, for how long and what we will do together. When I ride her we are joined by more than mere reins and a saddle. Through the simultaneous interaction of our bodies and minds we transmute and become the product of our separate

parts. And yet she is her own autonomous self. I do not know if she thinks about me when I drive away from the paddock gate or if she just goes about her business of being a horse. I do know that even when I am not with her I am thinking about her. We are connected on both a physical and a metaphysical level, a blend of minds and bodies and yet we are synonymously separate individuals. My dissertation is equally complex. Like my horse, my project constantly inhabits my mind – I am connected to it consciously and subconsciously. And in return I constantly inhabit my project and, when my presence is added to that of the women I am researching there are too many voices struggling to be heard in one place. While the horsewomen will always have priority I realised that their unfolding stories are also my stories. Up to this point, however, my sole focus had been on the exegesis and it had become overloaded with multiple voices clamouring for attention. I needed to separate my voice from those of the other horsewomen and establish a new forum for this very subjective aspect of my research. I decided to write a collection of autobiographical horse stories using them as my creative work. I hoped that quarantining my voice in the creative section would distance me from the horsewomen in my study while allowing my voice to be heard in a forum of its own. I proposed that the link between the creative work and the exegesis would be the mirroring in my stories of the themes about women and horses that were continually emerging from the research. Interestingly, I was also experiencing a growing desire to respond to the generosity and honesty of those horsewomen who had participated in my research and I hoped that sharing something of my own life with horses would be seen as a reciprocal gesture. Many horsewomen, for instance, spoke to me about the fear that often plagued them when they rode their horses and, as this was something with which I was all too familiar, I proposed writing about the terror I experienced when my own horse once bolted with me in unfamiliar territory. I believed this thematic technique would serve a dual purpose of not only connecting the exegesis to the creative work, but it would also connect me as the writer/researcher to the horsewomen I was writing about. I had already made the assumption that the subjects of my research would also be its readers. By acknowledging that in asking about horsewomen I was also asking about myself I was able to create a space for my voice and this immediately legitimised my role as an embedded researcher. Rather than continually trying to muffle my voice, I had found a way to modulate it – turning up the volume in the creative section, lowering it in the exegesis while permitting its pervasive presence to quietly infiltrate the entire project.

Horses constantly remind me that things rarely pan out the way you think they will and practice-led research has a similar way of not sticking to the script. Instead it is an organic, integrated and emergent process that generates its own momentum. It is not for the faint-hearted. To turn obstacles into advantages you have to take risks, constantly readjust your viewpoint, welcome the unexpected and then be prepared to dump the ballast and change course. In order to maintain their focus researchers frequently revisit those fundamental questions that underpin all research – the ‘what’, the ‘why’, the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ of it all. The ‘what’ and the ‘why’ I already knew. Exploring the ‘who’ elicited some unexpected developments. In contemplating the creative work I had always assumed that I would be writing for an amorphous audience of generic horsewomen but on further reflection I realised that I had always had a more specific audience in mind. All along I had been thinking in terms of the horsewomen I knew - all those personal friends and acquaintances that I meet and talk to, sometimes every day, out at the horse paddock, at work, via emails, at the feed store and in the saddle shop. I also had a strong connection with the women in my study and

found myself reacting to their input even while attempting to faithfully record their narratives for the exegesis. I kept wanting to interrupt, comment, exchange ideas and share my experiences. In other words I wanted to have a conversation with these people. Clearly my project had become more than the simple act of recording and interpreting data and more than just ‘thinking out loud’ (Gunnars 2005: 437) – it was about reaching out and connecting with friends. This revelation was pivotal because identifying the ‘who’ of the project finally allowed me to determine the form, content, tone and voice of the creative work.

Because my goal had changed from one of storytelling to one of producing text as a means of social connection or, as Marcelle Frieman puts it, a ‘social event’ (2003), retelling my personal horse stories no longer seemed appropriate so I abandoned this idea and changed course. Besides, most people I know have already heard my cache of horse stories. In responding to the horsewomen I discovered I also wanted to articulate the many reflections about women and horses that had begun fermenting during the course of my research. At the same time I wanted to share the aesthetic knowledge of horses that I had accumulated over many years sharing their company. After all, as Nicholas Shakespeare says ‘What has an author to offer but himself?’ (2004: 105). If I could find a way to reach my audience, a way that would enable understanding to be constructed through our shared experiences, then I was hopeful that the creative work would become a social contract and engender ‘a sense of collaboration among author, text and readers to make meaning’ (Bloom 2007; 3). I now began to search for the ‘how’ in this creative process.

Annie Dillard in *Notes to Young Writers* says ‘read books you would like to write’ (2000: xii). With this in mind I re-examined the works of writers I admire. The list includes novelists, short story writers, poets, nonfiction writers, essayists, travel writers, newspaper columnists, diarists and, of course, my favourite equestrian authors. Interestingly the majority are female and many are Australian writers, although American essayist and poet Maxine Kumin remains a firm favourite. The thing that I admire most about their writing styles is their use of the conversational tone which is simultaneously personal, subjective, self-reflexive and intimate. They achieve a sense of fellowship with readers through the use of informal language and structure and are often quirky and funny with an off-beat approach to their subjects. I like those undercurrents of gentle persuasion, their humour and self-deprecation and respect those inflections of authority which I believe result from lived experience, observation and intelligent reflection. Their appeal, for me lies in their style. They are the sorts of writers who make you feel as if you are ‘in good hands’ (Halligan, 2007: 14).

It just so happened while I was mulling over these thoughts about style and form that a friend gave me an essay by Australian writer Anne Manne, thinking I would be interested because it contained a reference to horses. But it was not so much the horse that captured my attention as something Manne wrote. She asked ‘What if you were so utterly alone in the world that the only time you felt the touch of another human being was when a podiatrist trimmed a corn? Or a hairdresser brushed your hair?’ (2007: 32). I was hooked. Everything about this essay appealed to me. This was the genre I had been searching for. I wanted to write like that. Make my readers feel that they could trust me when I offered them a different point of view. Make them smile a little and want to join me in conversations about horses. I began to see the possibilities inherent in producing a collection of personal essays which could become ‘... a site for social interaction between writers, readers and texts’ (Frieman 2003).

Essay theorists are as devoted to the essay as I am to my horses. They invariably defend their beloved genre by rattling off a pedigree that includes the great foundation sire Montaigne or trotting up its French etymological provenance as further evidence of its legitimacy as a literary form. They like to point out that essay is a dying art, marginalised, undervalued and under-utilised (see, for example, De Obaldia 1995, Good 1998 and Snyder 1991) as they prod and poke for signs of life as if the essay was some decrepit old horse on its last legs. Most of these theorists were writing in the 1990s indicating perhaps that the essay was experiencing some kind of crisis of authenticity at that time. Today the essay appears to be alive and well and is published in a multitude of forums from literary journals to newspapers and popular magazines to collected works, in hard copy and on-line, ruminating on every subject under the sun. Yet even now some devotees of the essay are prone to lament that the essay form has been subverted and transformed into something else. For example, in 2004 Robert Dessaix thundered that:

The essay – in this country, at least – seems to be drifting away from anything resembling imaginative reflection or the tentative speculations of a nimble intellect towards high-minded haranguing and hectoring; away from the lament or playful doodle towards setting fire to the furniture; away from the literary towards the journalistic; and away from intimate disclosures towards faceless assertions of public virtue. Indeed, as often as not it seemed to have even drifted away from the written composition towards a public lecture written up after the event. (2004, vii)

I would argue that essaying appears to be not only healthy but flourishing in this country and one need only look at the writings of Cassandra Pybus (1994), Ann-Marie Priest (2004), Glenda Guest (2005), Inga Clendinnen (2006), Robyn Davidson (2006), Anne Manne (2007) and many more as evidence of this. By its very nature however, the essay genre eludes definition; which may account for Dessaix's apparent frustration. How is it possible to categorise, define and pin down the indefinable? Attempts to define and categorise the essay generally end in admissions such as 'the modern essay is defined by the very uncertainty of definition' (Mortimer 2006: 31) or 'there is no essay, only essays, as many essays as there are essayists' (de Obaldia 1995: 1). Aldous Huxley describes a three-poled frame of reference for the essay when he suggests 'there is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal' (1958: Preface). This very elasticity of form and function ensures that the essay is eminently suited to contemplating all kinds of subjects from any number of angles making it a very adaptable genre. Essays also have the potential to be very accessible and the qualities of the personal essay in particular seemed to me to offer an effective means of connecting with horsewomen. As Phillip Lopate explains, the informal, intimate, discursive style of the personal essayist 'sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue – a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness and companionship' (1995: xxiii), although I would contest the need for 'testiness' – it is not in my nature and would probably cause my readers to reach for the reins and gallop away.

There are other more esoteric aspects of the personal essay that add to the appeal. Adorno holds the essay to be a democratic genre that allows for individualism and encourages intellectual freedom which in turn challenges prevailing academic discourses (in Brugman 1993: 75; Good 1988: 177) and these sentiments that sit well with my own philosophical need to challenge existing boundaries and think creatively. Brugman also claims that the

essay ‘gives us the possibility of introducing new meanings and ways of thinking ...’ (1993: 75), something I hope to achieve by choosing essays over storytelling for the creative work. The flexibility of the essay readily lends itself to a collected format. While Huxley claims ‘a collection of essays can cover as much ground ... almost as thoroughly as ... a long novel’ (1958: Preface), I saw the format as being particularly suited to the thematic mirroring I propose using to link the exegesis and the creative work. There are also suggestions that the essay is a particularly feminist form of writing. As a female studying a certain community of women, aspects of feminism are central to my research and it is interesting to note the parallels that exist between the patriarchal origins both of essaying and horsemanship. In the introductory essay in their book *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*, Joeres and Mittman argue that despite its white middle class patriarchal beginnings, ‘it is only in the past century that women in greater numbers have begun to claim the essay as a form of their own’ (1993: 13). Similarly, it is only since the invention of the combustion engine when men ceased to dominate equestrian culture through their reliance on horses for most aspects of human activity that women’s interest in horses increased. Contemporary ‘horsemanship’, despite the sexism associated with the name, has become largely feminised and as a consequence women’s ways of being with horses have significantly changed the manner in which horses are regarded and cared for in modern society. My research indicates that women’s relationships with horses are personal and intimate. They regard them as friends, family and equals, significant others and co-dependents in the shared business of living. Joeres & Mittman suggest that the modern essay, with its affinity for the personal voice, everyday subjects and informal style may be claimed as ‘uncannily feminine’ (1993: 19). Inga Clendinnen’s description of the essay as ‘a direct, equal, personal communication on a matter of shared interest between writer and reader’ (2006: 7), also evokes female models of horsemanship. These feminist links between genre, gender and research further validated my choice of essaying as a suitable way of connecting the disparate strands of my work.

The goal of any writer is to connect with his or her readership and the strong personal voice typical of personal essays allows for an intimate connection with readers. Joeres and Mittman ask ‘what happens when we add the reader as a factor in the process of essay production and think about the essay as dialogue, as initiating discussion, as inviting reaction, response?’ (1993:18). I believe that the possibility for real and meaningful and satisfying connections between writers and readers is what happens. Thinking back to Anne Manne’s essay on loneliness in the light of current research that predicts that by 2025 a third of all Australian households will consist of just one person (McInnes 2007: Books19), it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that in these times of increasing social isolation personal essays might serve as a point of contact. Those authors, whose personal conversational style suggests care and compassion, might just offer an interlude of intellectual stimulation and companionship to readers who only have the dog for company. I don’t imagine that horsewomen will be immune from this predicted lack of human contact and would therefore be happy if my collection of essays performed such a useful social function.

Of course, essayists have to be careful with the tone they employ if they want to avoid alienating their readership. It is best not to be too didactic, hectoring or pompous, nor to make claims for universal truths. As Inga Clendinnen cautions (and perhaps this is what Robert Dessaix meant):

I know you can't preach in an essay because it turns into a sermon, you can't teach in an essay because it turns into a lecture, you can't exhort in an essay because it turns into a harangue, and you can't dredge the mud at the bottom of your soul because it turns into a confession. (2006: 3)

In my experience there are as many solutions to horse problems as there are horses in the world. There are no single answers and few universal truths in equestrian culture. Any truth that I have to offer by way of an essay will be both personal and provisional. I already foresee, for example, that the essay I plan to write about the rise and fall of a particular brand of natural horsemanship in Australia may disturb and even offend some people, but it will be my version, my truth and my opinion. I will simply put it out there for public consideration.

Choosing to write a collection of personal essays helped resolve the 'how' of my creative project but it also provoked another question. Would my targeted audience of horsewomen really be interested in reading what I had written? I believe my research to date suggests that they would. The horsewomen I contacted were curious, keen to participate and interested in the results of my research. Horses are great unifiers. They give meaning to the lives of their owners who love to talk about them. Whenever horsewomen gather, the air vibrates with endless discussions about horses. Horsewomen are also good listeners and, because horsemanship is a constant striving to connect with a mysterious otherness, it is a culture of learning. Women have learnt to listen not only to their horses, but also to the wisdom of instructors, mentors and trusted friends for advice, information and support and, as a consequence, they are informed, educated and discriminating. Horse people are always hungry for information and, while there is a plenty available to them, I have yet to find a collection of reflective essays written by an Australian horsewoman for Australian horsewomen. I expect my collection of essays will resonate with their intended readership.

Of course, any voice that sets itself up as 'expert' must pass the test of credibility. Writers cannot simply assume that readers will automatically trust what they have to say. There are a number of strategies that researchers can employ to establish their credibility. A climate of trust, for example, can be an additional function of the exegesis. I expect to be judged on my treatment of the horsewomen – the respect I afford them, the clarity I allow their voices, the space I give their opinions, emotions and attitudes and the conclusions I draw about them – and I expect that the respect earned by way of the exegesis should flow on into the creative work. Maintaining a public profile is another valid way for researchers to reinforce their authenticity. I am an active participant in my equestrian community where I am not only regarded as an equal by my peers but it also keeps me abreast of contemporary issues, attitudes, interests and opinions. I contribute to horse-related web-based equestrian newsletters and forums. Getting my work into print, speaking in public, presenting at conferences and keeping up with local, national and international networks of horsewomen are all useful ways of authenticating my voice and earning respect. The feedback I receive suggests that horsewomen, and particularly my local community of horsewomen, are genuinely interested in and supportive of my research. This bolsters my confidence about the validity of the emerging shape and direction of my project.

The bones for many of the essays already exist in the context of the papers, presentations and talks I have given throughout the course of my candidature. For example I made a poster presentation to an equine science conference in Milan suggesting that scientists could more

effectively disseminate their findings by identifying and catering for the specific information needs of horsewomen who have substantially taken over the leisure horse industry worldwide (Burr 2005). My standpoint generated a flurry of concern amongst the scientists and I plan to write about this experience in an essay. I am also keen to explore the significance of persistent male gender biases in a culture that had become increasingly feminised, and I am ruminating on the possible meanings of our contemporary obsession with changing the innate beauty of horses through the use of horse clothing and artificial grooming practices. I also plan to reflect on aspects of my personal history with horses. Almost all of these essay topics have their origins in the exegesis, they then evolved into spoken presentations and now, highlighting that dissertational circularity that I referred to earlier, they will metamorphose into essays through the feminist strategy of turning speech into text (Joeres and Mittman 1993: 18).

Conclusion

Practice-led research allowed my dissertation to emerge from and be shaped by the research process itself. I suggest that my PhD experience demonstrates that it is possible to take an alternative approach to postgraduate research which is creative yet still satisfies the academic requirement for a bipartite dissertation. It is possible for the exegesis to perform multiple concrete and esoteric functions which are simultaneously traditionally academic and essentially creative.

Genre can both generate and define a creative dissertation and locating a suitable genre may be the critical element that allows researchers to break through the impasses and realise their aspirations they hold for their work. I certainly found that those confounding slippages and leakages that were hindering my progress were brought to order through the agency of essay writing. The essays became the glue in my dissertation, connecting the various parts and providing unity through the instrument of my voice. Identifying points of connection between writing, research and riding reinforced and consolidated my creative practice, proving that research is an innately integrated process that cannot occur in isolation. Creative practice is never just about creative outcomes – it is about creative thinking, creative design and creative awareness.

In many ways research is like riding a horse. Both require tact and skill, constant adjustment and an open-minded attitude. It is important to guide with a light hand and to be open to the possibilities ahead – the corners that must be rounded, the fences that may be jumped and the chasms that should be avoided. Preparation is vital, although a little fear is natural as it will almost certainly keep you alive and engaged with what is happening underneath you. Sometimes you can only walk while at other times the whole thing takes off at break neck speed and all you can do is hang on tight and turn loose to the thrill of the experience. Yes, research is like riding ... it is exciting, it can be unpredictable and it is ... deeply satisfying.

List of works cited

Bloom, L Z. 2007 *The essay connection: Reading for writers*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin

- Brugmann, M 1993. 'Between the lines: On the essayistic experiments of Helen Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa"', in R Boetcher Joeres and E Mittman (eds) *The Politics of the essay: Feminist perspectives*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 73-84
- Burr, S 2006 *Dancing with horse whisperers: What horse(wo)men want*, Poster presented at Proceedings of the 2nd International Equitation Science Symposium, Milan, Italy
- Clendinnen, I 2006 *Agamemnon's kiss: Selected essays*, Melbourne: Text Publishing
- Dally, K Holbrook, A Lawry, A and Graham, A 2004 'Assessing the exhibition and the exegesis in visual arts higher degrees: perspectives of examiners' in *Working Papers in Art and Design*,3 (Peer-reviewed papers from the Research into Practice Conference, 2004). Retrieved 9/03/2006 from <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol3/kdfull.html>
- Davidson, R 2006 'No fixed address: Nomads and the fate of the planet', *Quarterly Essay* 24. Melbourne: Black Inc
- De Obaldia, C 1995 *The Essayistic spirit: Literature, modern criticism, and the essay*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Dessaix, R (ed) 2004 *The Best Australian Essays 2004*, Melbourne: Black Inc
- Dillard, A 2005 'Introduction: Notes for young writers' in L Gutkind (ed) *In Fact: The Best of creative nonfiction*, New York: Norton
- Frieman, M 2003 'Dangerous dreaming: Myths of creativity' *TEXT* 7:1. Retrieved 5/09/2007 from <http://www.griffith.edu.au/text/school/art/text/oct03/freiman.htm>
- Good, G 1988 *The Observing self: Rediscovering the essay*, London and New York: Routledge
- Guest, G 2005 'Snorters and chucklers', *Artlook* 10: Nov.
- Gunnars, K 2005 'The Imagetext: On the all-inclusive essay-fiction hybrid' *Literature Interpretation Theory* 16: 431-39
- Halligan, M 2007 'Searching for the elusive origins of a migratory bird' *The Canberra Times* Panorama October 6: Books14
- Huxley, A 1960 *Collected essays*, New York: Bantam Classic Retrieved 21/10/2007 from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/93424/Aldous-Huxley-Collected-essays-essays47-v3-0>
- Joeres, R Boetcher and E Mittman (eds) 1993 *The Politics of the essay: Feminist perspectives*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Lopate, P (ed) 1995 *The art of the personal essay: An anthology from the classical era to the present*, New York: Anchor Books
- Manne, A 2007 'Only connect: Loneliness in the age of freedom', *The National*, May: 33-39
- McInnis, S 2007 'Emerging from our dreamy period' *The Canberra Times* Panorama October 6: Books19
- Mortimer, A. K 2006 'The essay according to Sollers: A personal and parabolic genre' *The Romanic Review*, 97(I): 33-49
- Priest, A-M 2004 'Towards an erotics of reading' in R Dessaix (ed) *The Best Australian essays*, 2004, Melbourne: Black Inc, 162-166
- Pybus, C (ed) 1994 *Columbus' blindness and other essays*, St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press

Rakow, LF and LA Wackwitz 2005 *Feminist communication theory: selections in context*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications

Saukko, P 2003 *Doing research in cultural studies*, London and Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications

Shakespeare, N 2004 'Somerset Maugham' in R Dessaix (ed) *The Best Australian Essays 2004*, Melbourne: Black Inc

Snyder, J 1991 *Prospects of Power, Tragedy, satire, the essay and the theory of genre*, Lexington: University of Kentucky