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## **Fictionalising real people**

### Abstract

If the novel is a mediation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters, as writer and philosopher Milan Kundera suggests, can memoir be seen as a reflection on life through the eyes of real people? And what happens then if this mediation or reflection on life combines both imagined and real people in imagined and real places? It is this blending of memoir and fiction that interests me most and forms the basis for my PhD thesis. For my presentation today I will focus on ownership of stories and point of view. In particular, what happens when point of view in memoir or fiction is not limited to first person but seeks to move beyond writing about the self and include the stories of 'silent' others. Through my creative work I am attempting to give voice to a silent 'other', a community under-represented in Australian literature, a working class Melbourne suburb. Some of you may have heard of Broadmeadows, one of Australia's poorest suburb, a community steeped in poverty, illiteracy and unemployment when I was growing up there in the sixties and seventies. And little has changed today. In 2011, close to 15 per cent of its youth population are unemployed, and with its relatively low rents it continues to attract new immigrants from diverse countries. These are just some of the facts and in writing a story of Broadmeadows I could easily stick with the facts in a kind of journalistic reportage of a time and place. However, as a result of my thesis study, my wider research and a developing interest in the blurring of fact and fiction I find I am drawn to new opportunities around creative nonfiction and the novel.

### Biographical note

Caroline van de Pol is a lecturer in Media and Communication at RMIT University and has worked as a journalist and editor for major metropolitan newspapers. She is currently completing her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Caroline has published two non-fiction health books, including her most recent *Handle With Care* (2008), which she co-authored with Evelyn Tsitas.

### Keywords:

Truth - ethics - memoir - fiction - point of view

In this paper I will explore how a writer selects the form that is best for their particular storytelling. Memoir or fiction? Nonfiction or novel? Does it matter? If so, why? I will focus, in particular, on two questions a) who has the right to own or tell certain stories? And b) How do ethical considerations of voice and point of view impact on sharing stories. In reflecting on and describing some of my own writing processes, while at the same time drawing on the wide ranging views of other writers and academics, I will argue that a writer needs to be concerned with ethical issues around ownership of stories and authenticity of voice, but at the same time the writer should seek to represent different world views and insights to those sometimes unfamiliar worlds while providing a voice for the silent 'others'. Arnold Zable calls it, playing hide and seek or revealing 'little worlds', while Melissa Lucashenko suggests it's not the writer that matters; it's the words (2011).

As Jill Ker Conway suggests, the popularity of memoir, both in the writing and reading of it, 'lies not in theory, but in cultural history: it has to do with where we look when we try to understand our own lives, how we read texts and what largely unexamined cultural assumptions we bring to interpreting them' (1999: 4).

According to Paula Fass in her paper "The Memoir Problem", the memoir as a genre, despite its popularity, needs rescuing as 'a useful, even essential form of writing'. She goes on to argue that many memoirs 'show [a] deep commitment to capturing the passage of time that it may be possible to conclude that memoir writing today provides insights into how history is experienced today' (2006).

But not all writers and academics agree that memoir is the best way to present reality or history. As writing and reading helps us to understand ourselves, our lives and our past, it also enables us to discover other cultures and other lives, but not all 'others' and their lives are part of the stories we tell, the stories we read or the stories that are published.

There will always be questions around how we see storytelling and why some experiences are included in 'literature' and other experiences are left out of the conversation entirely (Conway, 1999: 6). It is these 'silent' voices, and with them, the ethical considerations of writing them that has informed many of the papers we have already heard at this conference.

In the process of writing something that I care about, I am exploring form and content and negotiating which genre best fits the storytelling. Is it memoir or is it fiction? I think it's both, but what will the reader think? Perhaps I should take the advice of one of Australia's leading literary journalists and novelists, Helen Garner and just call it a 'book'. But is that a cop out? Am I leaving my reader with a bad taste by not confessing it's all true but reliant upon the fluidity of memory. Or is it more truthful, more 'ethical' even, to say 'it's a novel based on a true story'.

Garner, who eloquently moves between fact and fiction, argues there can be no writing without the creation, the making up and shaping, of a persona.

In order to write intimately – in order to write at all – one has to invent an 'I'...The word 'invent' is probably not the right word. It seems to imply something rational, purposeful, clear-headed, conscious. What about 'choose', then? How about this: 'I choose, in the act of writing, aspects of myself that will suit the tale that is wanting me to tell it'? (2001)

### Who owns the story?

As Kundera suggests, the examination of our 'inner life' can assist in fiction writing. And I propose this same examination is also a feature of memoir. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera notes: 'We need only examine our own lives to see how much this irrational system, far more than reasoned thoughts, directs our attitudes' (2000: 59). It is this unexamined life – a life already lived - that comes under scrutiny in memoir in a way that doesn't happen in fiction. I would argue that all writing is fiction, if we take the Latin word *ficto* to mean making up, shaping and creating. Fiction, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, reveals truth that reality obscures.

But what are the ethical considerations for a writer when this mediation or reflection on life combines both imagined and real people in reconstructed and real places? What happens when voice and point of view in memoir is not limited to first person but seeks to move beyond writing about the self and include the stories of 'silent' others. Who owns the story? What are the rights and responsibilities surround what Zable calls the 'urgency' of story telling for others?

As discussed, my creative work aims to capture a time and place and its people, a silent community. My 'memoir' is not so much autobiographical as it is a 'fragment of a story'; a story about working class Melbourne. I call it a 'fragment of a story' because I am not attempting to write history. It is neither the full story nor the only story of growing up in Broadmeadows.

The work in progress is to a large extent about the 'other' a 'silent other'. By way of background, this hybrid 'memoir as novel' includes the true story of two brothers, real people, real brothers, who are both blind as a result of freak childhood accidents - a year apart. Who would believe it? Strange, but true. I have known these brothers all my life; they are among my closest friends. But I am not only writing about them, I, as the author, take on their voices, their point of view. But I am not male and I am not blind. What right do I have? What responsibilities and obligations do I have? Already this week we have heard of similar dilemmas writers have faced when writing about family and friends. Some argue show all, others suggest show nothing. I teeter somewhere between the two, preferring trust and negotiation.

In searching to address these difficult issues around ethics, point of view and authenticity, I have been introduced to a wide range of writers and academics, including the works of Janet Frame (*Living at the Maniototo*), Inga Clendennin (*Tiger's Eye*) and more recently I have been encouraged to look at the work of Fernando Pessoa (*The Book of Disquiet*).

Pessoa was, according to critics and scholars alike, a master of multiple voices, each with different styles, idioms and personalities. Along with seventy or so of these created writing characters, he created Bernardo Soares for *The Book of Disquiet*.

In reading Pessoa, I find some further insight into what Kundera calls the mediation on existence. Pessoa's musings about life with little actually happening allows the reader insight to his turmoil, fragments of his life littered with introspection and an examination of his self, his characters, his voices - and his life.

### Fusing fact and fiction

If the notion that truth is stranger than fiction supports the increasing popularity of memoir, then what is the effect when fact and fiction are fused, as those previously

mentioned writers, Frame, Clendennin and Pessoa have all successfully and eloquently managed to do. David Lodge observes how this 'cross fertilization between the novel and historiography' can result in a more compelling story. He argues:

In the non-fiction novel, new journalism, 'faction', or whatever one calls it, the novelistic techniques generate an excitement, intensity and emotive power that orthodox reporting or historiography do not aspire to, while for the reader the guarantee that the story is "true" gives it a compulsion that no fiction can quite equal. (1992: 42)

Author Antony Beevor believes the barrier between fact and fiction is eroding fast. By exploring this erosion, this blurring, I am attempting to produce a true story as a novel, searching for something Ernest Hemingway calls truer than true. Rather than an accurate, chronological reporting of facts, which relate to events now decades old (and therefore hard to verify) and people who are now long dead (who may have a different point of view), I have aimed to tell a 'compelling' story of family life, to shape it into a narrative that can be read and understood. Along the way I have found that these memories of mine, and the stories they 'produce', can be very different among siblings, relatives and friends. It all depends on who is telling the story; in whose eyes are we witnessing events, feelings, and responses? And perhaps more importantly, *why* are they telling us this story?

Inga Clendinnen, an historian, academic and writer, suggests we always trust our own memories over those of others. She goes on to say: 'we are notoriously dismissive of other people's recollections, and ferocious in defence of our own' (2000: 226). In writing her memoir *Tiger's Eye*, she confesses she did not confer with her brother as an 'alternative source' of information and acknowledges his memories and experiences 'will be quite unlike mine'. While I have discussed memories, stories and anecdotes from my childhood with family and friends, and even shared early drafts of my work in progress I, like Clendinnen, have decided against relying on them as alternative sources. I have instead decided to 'own' this story, to make it my story or my storytelling, to be more precise.

Contributing further insight and perspective on story ownership is the debate about non-Indigenous writers creating Indigenous characters. Anneli Knight argues non-Indigenous writers should not be deterred from writing Indigenous characters but should instead 'proceed through a process of detailed research and empathetic writing to create Indigenous characters that ring true' (2010). While Knight acknowledges a significant aspect of writing fiction is writing 'the other', she adds that it comes with responsibilities and question. 'What right do I have to recreate the world I was living in within my fiction?' I have asked this question of myself. Perhaps part of the answer lies in Knight's own conclusion:

Rather than being deterred, non-Indigenous writers are encouraged to engage with this discussion and develop an appreciation of its context and multi-layered complexities, and then apply a process that involves a depth of research and finally empathetic writing to set themselves the highest goal of creating Indigenous characters that ring true. (2010)

It is hard to ignore this advice when it comes to creating any characters, real and imagined. Most writers endeavour to create characters that are believable but do they have to live in a certain place, have a particular experience or worldview to achieve this? Is it enough that I have entered a long lasting relationship with the silent others, that I have lived with them, walked the streets of Broady with them, listened to their stories at length and yes, even read early drafts to them for veracity? Does this level of research give me the permission to write the stories?

### **Point of view**

Carmel Bird, when discussing Point of View in her book *Dear Writer*, a collection of letters to aspiring writers, identifies authenticity of voice as critical for the reader to believe the storyteller. Bird says 'we feel safe to believe what we are being told because the teller believes, because the writer is in control of the material' (1988: 28). In the same way, Bird highlights the importance of not only writing what you know but also caring about what you write. Quoting Nabokov, Bird advises that a writer should 'take nothing for granted'. She argues:

You have to know what you are writing about, have to believe what you are saying, have control of what you are saying, and care very much about it. The question of care is an important one. If the writer does not care about the story, how can the reader be expected to care? (1988: 28)

In exploring shifting forms and stylistic patterns of memoir, novel and creative non-fiction I have been looking for a way to write about the self and others, about place and, perhaps, most importantly the things I, as a writer and reader, care about. Why does this story of Broadmeadows, and its people, matter to me? In my story I have included the point of view of a young mother of eight, living in a housing commission estate struggling with mental illness and addiction to valium (my mother) alongside the point of view of my friend, a twelve-year-old boy who loses his sight in a schoolyard collision and a year later watches as his seven-year-old brother goes blind from a freak accident in a supermarket. Through point of view I have attempted to show not tell, to uncover and reveal, not report, preach or patronise.

Janet Frame, in her autobiographies and in her novels, teases the reader with a blurring of fact and fiction. In her prologue to *Living in the Maniototo*, Frame introduces her narrator as 'a shadow, a replica of the imagined, twice removed' and the book takes many twists as the reader grapples with the stories 'lived and told' and whether they are real or imagined.

In the section, Naming People and Places, Frame introduces us to the three narrators, Alice, Violet and Mavis, who take up the story/stories at various intervals in the novel. In first person she invites us into her world and shares some of the morals and responsibilities that concern her as a writer. She says, 'I will now describe you something of my past life before I occupied the house in Berkeley. I will tell you about Blenheim and my life there' (2008: 9). For the reader, it is an invitation that holds authority and authenticity. In the same way autobiographical fiction may begin with the invitation, 'I'm going to tell you a true story'. Did Frame ever live in Blenheim or did she 'invent' it?

If the difference between memoir and fiction comes down to what really happened, then does the same go for writing about real people, is that what gives it the nonfiction categorization?

With my own creative work I started out writing memoir, using real names, real people, real places and I stayed with that form for some time, until I came to writing some difficult material. I struggled with telling some stories, some events around illness and loss, and I found it hard to write the emotion it stirred, despite the years in between the events and the telling. It wasn't until I turned to the tools of the novelist to find ways to get to a deeper truth that I then crossed the line between fact and fiction. I changed real people into fictional characters. I changed their names and blended some character traits. I think it has worked for me to the extent that someone referred to one of the main characters - my younger sister - by her fictional name and I didn't immediately recognise who they were talking about.

Francesca Rendle-Short in the introduction to her memoir/novel *Bite Your Tongue*, says it was through the invention of a fictional character she was able to tell a difficult story.

Some stories are hard to tell, they bite back. To write this one, I've had to come at it obliquely, give myself over to the writing with my face half turned; give my story to someone else to tell. My chosen hero is a girl named Glory. (2011: 5)

Perhaps in the same way that I care about what I am writing, I also care about my reader. If I say to the reader 'this is a true story' then I care about committing to that pact with my reader. I'm not going to lie to them, but I also care about presenting a compelling story that is a good read, that is more concerned about an emotional truth than remembering, with accuracy, what my mother looked like and what she said when she told me baby number nine was on its way.

According to writer Taylor Antrim, some memoirs would be better as fiction, but is the converse the same? Would some 'true story' novels work better as memoir? Think of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a book he called a Nonfiction Novel, would it have been acceptable as a memoir? Would it have achieved the same acclaim?

Antrim goes on to argue: 'Memoir writing is cheating...too often memoir seems to me an excuse to be fragmentary, incomplete, narratively non-rigorous. Let me put it another way: Why aren't these guys writing novels? They use a novelist's tools: dialogue, scene, descriptive detail' (2010).

In conclusion, and to return to Milan Kundera, this close examination of the inner life, this mediation on existence helps us understand other cultures, other worlds and to find ways to write them, to write stories with truth, sometimes fictionalising real people.

I suggest this ongoing discourse will contribute to greater understanding of ethical considerations to do with a writer's roles and responsibilities. In other words, why we should care about 'what' we write and perhaps, more importantly for this paper, 'who' we write.

In the words of philosopher Francis Bacon, truth is so hard to tell, it sometimes needs fiction to make it plausible.

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