

**Swinburne University**

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**The hybrid**

**Abstract:**

*The hybrid* is an integral element of stories-within-a-story comprising a creative artefact for a PhD in writing by artefact and exegesis through practice-led research. This story partially explores queer theory. Dominant themes are the challenges and possibilities of being different, a breed of 'others': *The hybrid* explores dichotomy; it is about crossing thresholds. Additionally, the narrative takes on 'cross-genre': it is a short story that crosses borders of genre fiction in order that a reader may approach the work with fewer preconceptions. Having preconceptions leads to breaches in the implicit agreement between writer and reader, where the writer 'clothes' a work by genre (e.g. science fiction or fantasy) and the reader enters the reading seeking elements of that 'promised' genre. As one story-within-stories, *The hybrid* is attentive to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) resonating principles of the rhizome: connection, heterogeneity and interconnections.

**Biographical note:**

Eugen Bacon studied at Maritime Campus - Greenwich University, UK, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. Her arty muse fostered itself within the baroque setting of the Old Royal Naval College, and Eugen found herself a computer graduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing. She is now a PhD candidate in Writing by artefact and exegesis at Swinburne University of Technology.

**Research background:**

*The hybrid* explores the adaptation of adult themes into productive elements of young adult (YA) fiction. The principle motif: if it happens to a young adult, it is writable as YA. The story emulates *Push* (1998), where Sapphire braves raw topics (incest, AIDS, self-image). *The hybrid* also investigates 'queer', not to signify homosexual but rather an 'othering' (Warner 1991: 14). Lucy Nicholas explores this idea of split positions when she considers the 'inside/outside status' of identity and discourse, where thinking strategies may link to queer theory without delving into matters of gender or sexuality (2014: 72). The term 'queer' moves from its past definition as a noun or an identity to a wider sense of de-normalising—engaging with difference. Through similar engagement, *The hybrid* associates with split positions where the protagonist is half human. It also explores cross-genre writing in what author Denise Beckton (2014) terms crossover fiction, i.e. fiction that crosses between audiences. The narrative morphs from fantasy or soft science fiction into speculative fiction. Not only does the short story target a young adult to adult audience: it crosses genre as speculative fiction that is also literary, and also crosses the border (breaks the rule) of a story being complete within itself.

**Research contribution:**

As an integral part of stories-within-a-story, *The hybrid* embodies a 'network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact' (Luscher, cited in Pacht 2009: 2). The narrative considers the concept of the 'rhizome' that Deleuze and Guattari develop in *A thousand plateaus* (1987), where the 'rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 25). Aligned with Deleuze and Guattari's principle of multiplicity, the wholeness of stories-within-a-story is like the rhizome: it 'has no real rules or laws; it continuously adapts to incorporate other multiplicities' (Howe 2012). Each story part is like a 'plateau'—a rhizome is made of plateaus (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 21). *The hybrid*, one such story part, is an 'open and connectable' map with 'multiple entryways' (1987: 12). It is an integral part of stories-within-a-story but

‘detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification’ (1987: 12), read here in its detachable form as a standalone story.

Further, *The hybrid* navigates Annamarie Jagose’s (1996) positioning of 'queer', rescuing it from marginalisation or an acceptable shorthand for gay or lesbian, and taking it as another discursive horizon, another way of thinking (de Lauretis cited in Jagose 1996). Marginalised Myra is denaturalised because, as Kerry Robinson suggests, the construction of identities in early childhood is an integral part of children's everyday education experiences (2005: 19). Active or inactive propaganda infuses itself into notions of family, social acceptance and education, and releases its ink into young children. Vida tries to label or ‘normalise’ Myra in traditional terms of gender (and age): is she a girl? This story engages with difference through the character of Myra who is impulsive, even deadly, but her personality does not goad the reader to dislike her.

**Research significance:**

*The hybrid* has two distinct features: it crosses genre and re-conceives gender identity. It contributes to knowledge in foregrounding a larger form of stories-within-a-story that is the creative artefact for the purpose of a PhD through practice-led research. It was published as creative fiction in *Bukker Tillibul*, a refereed journal with an international refereeing board. Reviewers wrote:

*This piece is well located as genre fiction, regardless of elements of fantasy, speculative or science fiction ... it gets going into a fairly convincing narrative in time to make it an entertaining read.* (Reviewer 1 2014, pers. comm. 23 November)

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*This piece is clearly written with an enthusiasm for and familiarity with the genre. Some of the dialogue has real energy, especially that in the middle of story.* (Reviewer 2 2014, pers. comm. 23 November)

As genre fiction, the story *teases* out multiple ideas: it establishes forms in which adult themes can thrive in young adult fiction (in its judicious accommodation of toxicity in the innocence of youth); it investigates queer as in lauding the 'untraditional'—assuming

Hanna Kubowitz's meaning 'taken to signify strangeness, oddity, peculiarity or extraordinariness irrespective of sexuality' (cited in Kubowitz 2012: 201–202); it inspects the concept of Deleuze and Guattari's multiplicity, an approach that fosters connections but renders adaptability to whichever mounting, rework, formation: 'A new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch' (1987: 15). Perfectly, each story will display properties of a plateau and 'can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau' (1987: 22).

**Keywords:** Crossover fiction, queer, speculative, young adult (YA), creative fiction

## **The hybrid**

It started with a name. And ended in a swim.

Russet tresses enveloped Dale Hocking's face. Smile lines formed a faultless triangle from her nose to the corners of lips half curled in a ribbon. So young, bewitching: Dale was divine, no doubt, Vida Stuart knew. But he was drawn to Myra Lexus. Myra was blazing, unreachable; her kind of beauty rarer than a comet. She electrified him, stirred things in him that bewildered. And it was not just the sapphire hair splashed with light, or skin ever so fluorescent to behold; it was her secret.

That spring morning when Vida saw Myra naked as dew in the river, hair roped with weed and dripping wet, he knew she was a river child. He watched from the crag as she glided back and forth, hundreds of miles just about. Each blade of her hand cut smooth and powerful against the white tide, her swim far different from his splash and furious paddle. He watched even as it began to rain, a slow clap. It swelled into a pounding storm, mightier and mightier swirls that loosened pebbles. Myra swam deeper, further out. Water closed over her head and he panicked.

Something caught his eye in the direction of the Forest of Solemn to the west, behind shrubbery just before the valley. He could have sworn it was Dale but she couldn't be here. It was insane to imagine Dale might be watching him and Myra in the wet. The imagery and thought fizzed from his mind, turned to vapour by panic for Myra under the tide still. So he hurled stones into the bobbing water.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

As his fear grew, so did his hail of stones.

Plop, plop, plop, plop!

Then there she was, stepping out from the deepest belly at an impossible coast, beads of vicious waves and rain fresh still on glowing skin. And his heart staggered.

She climbed (dressed) to the crag and sat wordless beside him. He had seen her nakedness; now he was discomfited by the watching of it. But she didn't care. And it didn't seem to matter that he uttered no word.

*Plop!*

Her stone.

‘So you come here.’ She spoke without turning.

*Plop!*

‘Some.’ He wondered at the scratch in his voice.

‘And you swim?’

*Plop!*

‘Don’t mind a chill now and then,’ he said and hurled a pebble. ‘Why?’

‘I hope you chill better than you throw.’

‘Nothing’s wrong with my swimming, and chucking pebbles is a breeze.’

‘Course,’ she said, sly.

Her stone whizzed and bounced twice in the waves.

His dropped short.

That was all they ever spoke – until the day Dale Hocking brought up a name.

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Prep. The class hummed. Myra’s head was bent as her pencil moved on drawing paper. Dale turned from the front row, ringlets of her mane tossing.

‘Your dad –’ she said jauntily. ‘Is his name really Tonk?’

Myra, pencil moving, ignored what had been building at the small community school for a while now.

‘His name really Tonk?’ Loud.

The pencil stilled.

‘Oops,’ said Dale, tone syruped. ‘I forgot. He’s a fake dad. Your stepfather, isn’t he? Your real dad’s a *Grovean*.’

Humming died. Dale had said the unspeakable—talk of otherworldly beings on Earth.

The class stood on nails, many curious, some discomfited, most seeking a glint in Myra’s eye. Vida sensed impatience around him, a serpent-like eagerness for something that had been growing like an infection. But he wanted no part in it.

‘My father’s dead,’ Myra said with impossible calm. ‘Leave him out of this.’

Dale looked unruffled. Her mouth pushed ruthlessly on: ‘Let me see: Grovean father, human mother – that makes you a *hybrid*.’

Vida cringed, for he too had been called a hybrid, and not for Grovean reasons. Malformed species, divine Dale had said.

‘Hy-brid,’ she was saying now, rolling the word. ‘Know what that means, Myra?’ Her toss of mane followed nervous giggles in the class.

‘Ha bloody ha,’ said Myra. Her voice did not shift an octave.

‘See, Myra. It means that I don’t like hybrids.’

‘You’re stupid.’

‘Blooming heck,’ Dale, syrup making softer her voice. ‘Not stupid like you; spindly legs here –’ chin indicating Vida, ‘for a boyfriend.’

The class roared. And then they were yelling, jostling, surging forward for prime view, for Myra had shot straight at Dale. The two girls rolled a meter, rolled and rolled again. A teacher weaved through the sizzle and snatched Myra and Dale apart. A bubble hovered in the class still; Mrs White calmed it with a hand. Heads lowered and eyes turned downwards.

‘No more of this nonsense, now,’ she said. ‘And you two –’ hail in her glance, ‘– with me to the office.’

Nothing more was said of the incident, even when Dale returned surly to her seat, and Myra with a quarter smile. Both had been punished. But Vida remembered the laughter long after it settled; long after the chair that had swallowed him released him, and the burn of crimson left his face.

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The first peal of bells went. Bustle, as people moved. The class streamed out. Vida walked, as did Myra.

She fell in step alongside him.

‘Ta,’ said Vida, awkward.

‘Were you hanging out the whole day to say that?’

‘N-no...’

Icicles turned on him. None of the magnet that drew him; these ones glittered with tonnes of bad temper.

‘Why *think* it was for you?’ she said.

‘Wasn’t it?’

She swirled. He stopped too, and regarded her with a worrisome eye, his focus not on blazing sparkle but on a northern point on her forehead.

‘Your legs *are* spindly,’ she said. ‘Remember that. But you are *not* my boyfriend.’

‘All good.’ His eyes shifted to her grazed chin.

‘*Is it?*’

They walked in silence to the fork of the road that separated them: one path up the hill where Myra lived; the other down to the fold of a valley where Vida lived in a weatherboard house surrounded by a solid thicket of wild trees.

‘Until then,’ he said, parting.

She nodded.

He was well on his way down the vale when a pound of feet chased him.

It was Myra.

‘I thought, maybe,’ she paused. ‘Maybe you wanted to come to the river with me.’

‘No sweat.’

She started running, surging into a warm, chaffing wind. Her claret tunic lifted and sank with her knees. He ran behind, too slow to catch up, duffle bag too heavy, the path too cobbled in parts. And then they were out in sprawling fields of wild grass that led to the river, away from the knot of trees surrounding Vida’s house far east. Myra was swift and lithe, looping around shrubbery, gunning for it. Her laughter made melody in the whistling wind. He laughed with her as they ran, his own sound utterly rusty and scratched.

Finally she spun around. They almost tumbled in a heap. They lay face up, arms spread, fingers almost touching, eyes cast at a spotless emerald sky. Myra smelt of fennel.

‘Dale’s a bitch,’ she said to the skies.

‘Class was wretched,’ said Vida.

‘Wasn’t your fault. Girls are bitches.’

‘Aren’t you, Myra?’

She looked at him.

‘A girl?’ he clarified.

‘You crackers?’

‘So you really are then...’

‘Grovean?’ she helped.

He was going to say *hybrid*. ‘Are you?’

‘And if I am?’ Her gaze lingered.

He flushed.

‘Tell me, Vida.’ She knew his name. ‘What if I’m Grovean?’

‘People talk.’

He had caught snatches of hushed conversation, sometimes from his parents. All harmless talk, really, but sometimes anxious words, frightened even.

*‘...move with velocity of light. . .’*

*‘...switch through time, between worlds. . .’*

*‘...never die, not normally, anyways. Wonder what happened to T-Mo?’* Myra’s father, her Grovean past.

People tried to place her: *‘Is she a mammal?’*

*‘Don’t know.’*

*‘Then what?’*

Her mother, Salem, was wide-eyed and tear-prone. Fully mortal, as was Tonk: steel, brisk and dapper. But even his arrogance could not shield him or his wife from the shadow of the Grovean mantle. Though it was not explicitly spoken, young children were forbidden with a glance, a tug, a furrow of brow from entering the house with misted windows on the hill. A manor that climbed, open to the stars.

Now Vida’s curiosity overcame him.

‘How come he died?’ he asked. ‘What happened?’

Grass trembled slightly. A torn leaf, desiccated and useless, raced along the ground. Myra did not ask whom.

‘You miss him?’ he tried again.

She faced away. ‘How old are you?’

‘Eleven,’ he said. ‘You?’

‘Ancient.’ A voice within a voice, distant.

He sat upright. ‘What do Groveans do anyway?’ Bolder now.

‘Slay people.’

‘Really!’

She eyed him as if he deeply amused her.

‘Can you?’ he said. ‘Kill people too?’

Her expression altered. ‘What do you think?’

The glint in her dark eyes was almost difficult to catch. His brow lifted. His heart sang. He blinked, and she kissed him. His world swelled with shadows and light, distinction, restriction, temperature, ice, salt, earth. Texture, promise, complexity, integration: all trapped in an instant. His knees jellied, his hips blazed. His hands lost sensation. When he opened his eyes to find his brittle fingers on the rise and fall of her chest, he knew not how to lift them to the velvet smoothness of her face. At first, he could not define the parameters of what he felt. Then in a breath, Vida was new and old and happy and deliciously in love.

Myra jumped and skipped away, her laughter uncomplicated. She threw her head back and the glitter in her hair, a sapphire waterfall, bounced. He climbed to his feet, brushed his khaki shorts and chased, fast this time, running at his best until his heels sang. Elation touched him; the significance of the moment. Strangely, with wind on his face and a big, green sky above him, he also felt...

A surge of purity.

At last they came to the swell and swirl of the river. They stood on their crag, the sacred place of their first meeting. Vida's heart leapt at the sight of a figure in the water. Although Myra was half-close to a smile, her face was pallid. She gazed in silence at russet hair moving with nonchalance in silver waves below.

'Is that you-know-who?' she said quietly.

Vida processed the scene before him. It was Dale Hocking. Swimming in their river. Not as effortless as Myra, not as clumsy as Vida, who was wary of the water's belly. But there swimming, nonetheless, spoiling their fun.

'Come.'

The touch of Myra's fingertips was frost.

'Where to?' Vida hesitated.

'You know where.'

'Why?'

'You know why.'

'No. Myra, I don't.'

Still, he followed, as if in a spell, knowing she was plotting something.

'You shouldn't -' he froze his feet a little, risking weakly.

But she pulled him, the light in her eye too keen. And in a blink, she was gone. Vanished. She had literally thinned in air. Next he saw her, she stood silent on a northbound shore, naked; skin aglow; half-formed breasts alert. His breath caught. Dale was still swimming, free, shameless, playful even – utterly oblivious of added presence.

Not a ripple broke the water's surface with Myra's dive. She slithered, gliding like a water snake towards her prey. When water closed above Myra's head, chill touched Vida's flesh. Suddenly Dale was gasping and choking; soundlessly flapping and splashing. Then water covered her head too, and there was effervescence. Endless bubbles that broke the calm surface one after another. Then the bubbles stopped.

Even then, Vida wasn't convinced.

He sat and hugged his legs, waiting. Night fell whole and silent. Shadows awakened and crept. Darkness jumped and danced. Wind pulled water from his eyes. A yellow moon, hostile, sinister, stalked across the river. A wave slapped at the raised crag, and ice-cold spits struck his skin. Somewhere in the distance, inside the silence of night, Vida heard the crystal ping of a calling bird. He caught movement behind him and there she was—Myra. She slipped, fully clothed, beside him. She smelt of seaweed. Her face looked weightless.

They sat very still. If, disoriented, he wondered... nothing was said of it. How and why he spoke nothing, he didn't know. Perhaps it was a method to madness, or was it his acceptance of Grovean ... codes? he silently questioned. Myra hummed. Her low song carried something surreal and grey and wistful and sweet. He listened without melancholy, a part of him both frozen and thawed.

'Better head,' she said calmly, when at last she spoke.

'I guess.'

His awareness of her reeled his mind. He stood up, abrupt.

She watched him, head tilted. Her moonlit face was tender, ever so soft. Bewildered, he turned and ran, chased by a pounding of heart. In a flash, Myra's weed scent flew past him up the ridged footpath, swift as a spear. Dusk swallowed her litheness.

He surged behind her into spreading darkness, running further and harder than he ever remembered. He closed the space between them, madly laughing as he ran.

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