

## Swinburne University of Technology

### E. Don Harpe & Eugen Bacon

#### That danged gizmo

##### Abstract:

‘That danged gizmo’ emerges from collaborative practice between two culturally diverse authors: a retired American living in Georgia, and an African Australian living in Melbourne. The writerly alliance sees one author focus on characterisation (‘deep south’ dialogue), and the other on literary elements (playfulness with language, style and structure), both in quests to contribute to the quality of form in the work of science fiction. Each author approaches the writing with their own knowledge, their own biases, their own craft. Together, while navigating inherent challenges in multiplicity of voice, the artists reinvent discrete ideas and apply creative practice into a collective storytelling. Collaborative practice is a type of theft where literature is made up, where a multiplicity is endowed with significance. The success of multi-authored work relies on the participants’ ability to negotiate their diversity, adopt each other’s creativity and engender uniqueness to an artistic formation that is singular, seamless to the reader. In a contemporary context of digital and cyber realms, ‘That danged gizmo’ borrows from science fiction as a kind of hyperreality, where a machine destabilizes the relationship between a man and his wife.

##### Biographical note:

E. Don Harpe has had a varied career, from military service in the 60s to industrial engineering. Harpe is a published Nashville songwriter and a real descendant of the Harpe Brothers, America’s First Serial Killers. E. Don Harpe has nearly 40 short stories, including two in the *Twisted Tales II* anthology that won the Eppie Award for best science fiction anthology in 2007. Now retired and living in North Georgia, Harpe devotes his time to Helen, his wife of nearly 50 years, to his children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and to his writing.

Eugen M. Bacon, MA, MSc, PhD studied at Maritime Campus, University of Greenwich, less than two minutes’ walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. A computer graduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing, Eugen has published over 100 short stories and creative articles, and has in work a creative non-fiction book and a literary speculative novel. Her story ‘A Puzzle Piece’ was shortlisted in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013 and is published in Lightship Anthology 3. ‘Swimming with Daddy’ was shortlisted in the Alan Marshall Short Story Award 2016.

##### Keywords:

Collaborative practice—science fiction—coexistence—short story

‘DEY’S A TIME TO MAKE a stand, and dey’s a time to make tracks,’ my daddy used to say. I didn’t understand what he meant, ‘cause I’d never had to do either, but the fact is, I’m a right smart gal. I took one look at the yard filled with them danged gizmos and just about hit the road.

Say what you will. My name is Champ McPherson, and I’ve seen hardware and software go nuts. I’ve seen viruses wipe more than one system clean, and up till then I never had the inclination to get the hell out of dodge. But you don’t have to tell me twice. One look out the front window and out the back door I leapt.

The first of them danged things arrived at noon. I watched them from the safety of the attic (locked), and knew the electric fence would do a number on them. And it did! At first! But soon the fence lay on the ground smoking, as they rattled bolts, banged at the chain link, jumped back and forth, all angry and riled, getting ready to rush the house, looking to gain entrance by breaking down doors or smashing windows. Most of them were fine looking portables, laptops mostly, but from the attic window, I could make out a few palmtops, desktops and a couple of mainframes chugging up steam down below.

The latter were lending hefty muscle to the rest of the apparatus down there and, before long, they would smash into the house. I knew.

Wasn’t she something? I found her at an ancient shop in Omega St one mild autumn day. I eyed her in astonishment, ran my fingers across her glowing teal coat. I stroked the feminine outline of her screen, the contours of which resembled the shape of a woman’s face, high cheekbones and all. She was perfect. Just the thing I needed to zing up Slade’s humdrum life. ‘Twas hard enough getting his notice in bed; a piece of equipment might spark more attention off him, I thought. He could use her as a journal or a word processor, perhaps a platform upon which to test the Tec-build software for his shuttles.

Slade, he was a good boy, played it straight. Head full of tick-tock thoughts, I could read him like a watch, ever since and before we wed. He was a shuttle repairman down the South Depo. Every day he worked an eight-to-five. I never once knew him to miss a day of work, not even an hour. Soon as he was done at the factory, he’d be home like clockwork, never skipped the evening news.

Slade, he lit up like a Christmas tree, soon as his eyes set on the notebook.

‘Her name’s Alice,’ I said with smugness. ‘Bought her just fer yew.’

‘Yews de sweetest thang, Champ McPherson,’ he said to me, and at once powered the machine on. Her screen saver had basil green eyes and beach-keen hair, soft and supple. Her skin was creamy pink like fresh salmon.

‘She looks almost human,’ he said in stupefaction.

‘Shock proof,’ I said. ‘Trendy, ain’t she? Packs a refined graphics interface. Real time tracker too. Inbuilt. Yew can never lose her.’

Puppy eyes sought consent or authentication that he could fiddle with his new toy.

‘Go on,’ I smiled.

As he vanished into the study, I capped the occasion by cooking for him. It was an old gourmet recipe I got from my grandma, back in ‘17 before she passed.

I grabbed a couple cans of red beans and a box of instant rice from a shelf in the pantry, took a pound or so of hot sausage, some okra from the chill bin, didn’t take long for the kitchen to start smelling like the old South, back when there still was an old South. A random thought crossed my mind as I set the table. Before I knew it I had spiked a punch to set the mood right.

Slade emerged from his den with an odd look, gobbled dinner in silence. Soon as I rose to clear plates, he gripped my arm, escorted me to our chamber. There, he lay with me with more zeal than I had ever witnessed, with more ardour than he had ever shown, even on a mating moon.

From an eight-to-five, Slade became a nine-to-four, never mind it sliced our income. He left for work an hour late, having spent time with Alice; left the assembly line an hour early, another session with the machine before the evening news. His eyes now carried more than their pensive light. What went on inside them was more than tick-tock thoughts. As for Alice, when I wiped her screen, her eyes were nicely smoked up, her brow smudged with colour, her cheeks spread with blush to lift her complexion even more. Her beach-white hair was softer and suppler than ever, her full lips blood keen.

‘Oh my,’ I said to her with a tart smile. ‘Aren’t yew just de most darling little thang? Don’t know as I’ve ever seen a cuter ... notebook, and I reckon Slade – well, *honey*, he thinks so too!’

A petticoat glided along a creamy thigh across the screen. But what got to me was the smile, Alice’s teeth like fresh water pearls. I reached for the machine with spiteful hands, ready to crash her to the floor and trample her good. And I caught myself. Surely! This was a tad paranoid to say the least, perhaps even a smidgen over the frame. Was my mind hot and bothered with jealousy of a laptop?

There was no necessity for it, for sure, as Slade took me now each night, mating moon or not. I had something solid with him, nothing could beat that. No stupid tech-build would take my Slade away.

He still spent a lot of time in his den before the taking, so one day I had to know.

‘Dis ain’t right,’ I said to Slade. ‘What yew do in dere? What take so long? Yew know, wit Alice? What yew doing with dat machine?’

‘Stuff, just stuff. Nothing much.’

‘What kinda stuff?’

‘A bit a dis, a bit a dat. Nothing much.’

I raised an eyebrow, stared at him.

‘Dat’s de truth, yes, love,’ without flinch he said.

But with Alice's gilded brightness lighting up the house, I was certain that no spiked punch or dinner thing, not even Slade's need for me, fit the math to make him that committed, so aberrantly savage when we were joined between the sheets, when straight from the den he took me like a demon. He kept coming back for more but, desolate, I understood. It was nothing to do with a statement that I was unresistingly scrumptious, and everything to do with Alice, wrapping my husband with the silk of her web.

One night, after yet another of my grandma's old fashioned New Orleans dinners, he set out for the den as usual where Alice waited. I cleared the table, packed the dishes in the spinner, set it on. By the time the dishes were done and sparkling, Slade had still not emerged. I made myself a cuppa, steaming black coffee, laced it with the last of a bottle of brandy. I cupped the china with both hands, as if holding a fragile heart, finished my coffee alone. Only then did I give up on Slade and, with it any hope of a tumble. I thought I heard voices behind the door of the den, one crafty and eager, the other soft and caressing. I stood outside that door, hugged myself, not for warmth but dread. Were those sounds I heard duo voices in a room, or a sound card processing inside a machine, or demons in the core of my head? With profound wretchedness and legs knock-kneed with sadness, I made my way to the chamber.

He stole inside the sheets beside me as the clock inched towards midnight. I counterfeited sleep but he did not nudge me to wake me. I opened an eyelid, and there was no keen look on his face, the one he wore before he dragged me into his arms at dusk. Slade lay on his side, elbow under his head, half a smile on his face. He was fast asleep. He did not want me tonight; it hit me hard as he snored away. My husband did not want me, as had become customary after his nightly session in the den.

Next evening, I cooked for him something different. I grabbed a couple of green onions from the pantry, tossed them on top of reserve marinade chicken in a ceramic dish, spooned in some olive oil and *bok choy* pepper, baked everything until golden. He wolfed without notice and vanished into the den.

He was even later coming to bed that night. I tossed and turned, and tossed and turned again. Close to midnight, the door squealed and he slunk into the bedroom. I sat up with riot hair, snapped on the bedside lamp. There he stood, guilty as sin. He started to explain, something about some project or other. But I saw a hickey on his neck.

'Love at first bite, was it?'

Anger, when it arrived, came fast and hard like a thunderbolt. I leapt, cross-eyed with fury. My fist brushed past his jaw when I meant to punch his nose. I reached for his neck, proposing to strangle him, found it was sticky. I leaned close, and a sickly aroma of maple syrup wafted into my nostrils. Maple! That hickey was no lean bite, no mistake: it was a premier hickey, no holdback on it. And Slade had smeared maple syrup on his neck for it. Alice was a demon that had somehow managed to get physical and plant a hickey on my husband's neck.

Finally, worn with hitting him, I lay on the bed and pondered slitting my wrists or shredding up Slade. But all I wanted to do really, I finally figured, was to shove effin Alice

up his bum. The bubbles of something unformed spread inside me and rose to the surface but, before they could formulate into a plan, they were gone from my head. This was real, how easy, a machine had replaced me.

Sobbing into my hands, I fled. Dressed in nothing but a negligee, I ran out of the bedroom, leapt down the steps and out the front door into a well-lit street outside.

Slade stamped at my heels in bedroom slippers. He was beside himself, saying over and over: 'It was just stuff. Nothing much. Dat's de truth. Dat's de truth!'

His feet closed fast. 'Yew git back here. Champ McPherson.'

I turned right, ran all the way to the freeway. There, right there in the middle of the road, I lay face up, arms spread.

And though the road was dead at night and no traffic haunted it, Slade beseeched me: 'I love yew. Yews de sweetest thang. Git off de road!'

Just then, headlights rose from the distance. The red grew bigger and sharper until a turbo bus rolled into view. The driver was bobbin his head, lips pushed out like he was whistling.

Deaf to the rumble of the truck or Slade's pleading I lay silent. It took some time before I realised that Slade had stopped the bus; that the truck driver had raised me and tossed me onto grass at the other side of the road; that Slade had pulled me up by the arm and was leading me home.

Back in the house, I made straight for the den. But, again, Slade tried to calm me.

'Damn yew!' my fists pounded his face. I struggled with him, and was unstoppable this time. When I burst into the den, I was yelling and crying. I took hold of Alice, who sat grinning on his desk. She shuddered mildly, it seemed, as I raised her above my head and bashed her onto the ground. But her screen flew open and her face grew full of sweetness and deep secrets: a vague, butter smile full of knowing, the smile of an adulteress. I flung her against the wall and she crashed back to the floor. I was falling and kicking and sweating and thrashing. I meant to wreck her once and for all. But when I was done, she shone brighter than ever, finer than new.

Alice was shock proof.

Now she regarded me with a half-crooked smile. I moaned into the arm of my nightie that was torn and falling off my shoulder. I went down on all fours and cried to the gods of all ancestors when I wasn't cussing Slade.

'Godsake, Slade, a hickey!'

He drew me gently but firmly away from his den.

When he was asleep, I snuck out of the chamber and staggered right back to the den. I pushed Alice into a plastic bag and stashed her out with the garbage. Splendid thing there was a collection at dawn.

I slept until the wheels of the garbage truck woke me.

I found Slade in the kitchen, his arms tenderly wrapped around Alice. He wore the defiant look of a boy protecting his toy. Her inbuilt tracking device had led him to her. He locked the den and put a security code on it.

Soon as he left for work, I ran out the garden and into the shed. I grabbed a hammer, beat down the door. I threw Alice into the trunk and sped all the way to the lake. Three big sways, *hooray!* and Alice pitched straight up into the air and down in an arch. She met the lake with a splash. Water closed over her head and she did not come up.

I was bone weary when I arrived home. But elated I had got rid of that machine bitch once and for all. I poured myself a cup of coffee, laced it with new brandy.

I was on a second cup when the gizmos arrived. Machines from hell, they were, Alice's spirits come to get me. Before I hit the backdoor to the nearest telebooth, where I could call the military, get smoke, bazookas and lasers on them, I looked out the attic window at a mainframe, a large male autobot, bulk iron and distinguished features, an intel champ most lustrous and robust, and I thought how fine-looking a specimen ... If Slade could do it, that selfish prick, heck! maybe I could.

But what I could do most with now was a plan to seduce a hunk in the middle of a riot.

## **Research statement**

### ***Research background***

‘That danged gizmo’ uses science fiction as a kind of hyperreality, and assumes a contemporary context of the digital world and its effects on society. Herein, the machine surpasses the ‘original’ (a man’s wife), thus interrogating the boundaries between technology and humanity.

Collaborative practice is a type of theft... The ideas and languages we speak (and write) guide and expose our preconditioning. Multi-authored works—in the nature of their formation—are susceptible to disclose that literature is ‘made up’, that it is ‘multiple writings’ (Barthes 1977: 148) recycled and ‘endowed with significance’ (Genette 1997: 2–3). This knowing involves an awareness and a recognition of all text as a marriage of writings. Early versions of ‘That danged gizmo’ held up two narrators: the one of the ‘Suthern drawl’ and the one of the literary writing with imagery and allusions. In the total existence of writing, a text steals from many cultures, and the text’s unity lies in its destination, not its origin (Barthes 1977, p. 148). ‘That danged gizmo’ investigates the challenges inherent in collaborative practice, in particular where authors come from different disciplines, or cultures.

### ***Research contribution***

‘That danged gizmo’ is an artistic formation imprinted by each author’s external influences: family, self-experience, education, culture, society ... to explore an illusory world. The text is intended to irradiate disunity to its reader. In revealing multiplicities in the voice of the protagonist who is also the narrator, the work exposes the challenges of collaborative practice. It highlights the importance of the ‘death of the author’, a divorcing of the ‘self’ from the ‘other’ to achieve a text’s unity in its destination.

### ***Research significance***

‘That danged gizmo’ explores diversity in collaborative works, and the liminal devices within and without an artistic work that form part of the complex mediation between the work, its authors and its readers.

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