

## University of Newcastle, NSW

**Keri Glastonbury and Ros Smith**

### **Introduction: The Art of the Real**

This edited special issue of *TEXT* is derived from papers originally presented at The Art of the Real: National Creative Non-fiction Conference, organised by Kim Cheng Boey, Keri Glastonbury and Ros Smith of Newcastle University's Writing Cultures research group in May, 2008.

The particular focus we've chosen for this collection is papers by practitioners, writers of the real.

The idea for the conference came from our shared interest in kinds of writing that privileged the experiential and the real, especially the intimate practices of everyday life. As colleagues in an English department that includes both critics and creative writers, we had been struck by how much our theoretical interests converged. Rather than a divide between critical and creative practice, we found a productive shared interest in the much-documented turn towards 'reality' that has been identified as a phenomenon since the late 1990s. The conference aimed to capitalise upon this synergy, bringing together other practitioners and critics engaged with writing and theorising the intersection of the actual and the imaginary in everyday life.

In many ways the conference also began with the poster. The iconic Novocastrian image of a retro Nobby's beach landscape (pre-Pasha Bulka), also emanates the radioactive red of a speculative future. The spectre of the unreal haunts the real, in a town that might, in the Australian cultural imaginary, lay a peculiar claim to notions of realness. Of course, not strictly believing in the authenticity of either art or the real, this was something of a provocation.

The papers from the conference selected for this issue break down perceived institutional divisions between critical and creative practice and problematise simple separations of truth and fiction, art and the real. These contested binaries are often interrelated in the context of tertiary creative writing practice, where writers are also required to critically reflect on genre. Such discussions about the relationship between fact and fiction have set up something of a template for critical writing by writers of creative non-fiction, especially those studying for higher degrees. The engagement of these papers with critical and creative practice within the academy

is supplemented by other papers dealing with the productive tensions between fact and fiction, creativity and critical analysis more broadly. The resources of genre are repeatedly invoked as a way of negotiating these divides, and the diversity of generic forms represented in this collection presses at the boundaries by which creative non-fiction might be defined.

Linda Neil's 'Beautiful Lies My Father Told Me', ruminates on the way that family story-telling, with its performative embellishments, can be 'a form of anti-truth; or if not anti-truth, then a version of the truth which was perhaps richer, more fantastic, and sometimes more profound than the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. David Carlin's "'Do you mind if I invent you?' Ethical questions in the writing of creative non-fiction', also focuses on writing the father and the impossibility of ethical transparency in family narratives: 'But what if you do mind? Will that stop me?'

Alexis Harley takes on the grey zones of creative non-fiction from the perspective of pedagogy, and raises an interesting conflict in terms of practice and theory. While critical orthodoxy in English departments has moved away from notions of the literary that privilege 'individuality, originality or craft skills', this is still a familiar prescription for creative writing courses, including creative non-fiction. Yet, in their exegesis, we ask students to take on the critical paradigms of the discipline, seemingly flying in the face of authorial intention. Harley asks if what we should be assessing is 'not what and how they write, but how self aware they are in their writing', something very difficult to do in a post-Freudian world.

There are two essays on the essay in this collection: Danuta Raine's 'Essaying the Self: ethnicity, identity and the fictocritical essay' and Astrid Lorange's 'The Essay As'. Both open creative non-fiction forms up to interrogations beyond debates about narrative truth, and suggest a productive poetics for including 'the essay' under this rubric. The essay offers a space for philosophical narrative, perhaps the perfect medium for writers as thinkers.

Maria Freij's 'The Lingering Fog of Childhood' is a reminder that the somewhat catch-all moniker of creative non-fiction can also include poetry, and how poetry of the self cross-fertilises with other fields such as auto-ethnography (here, in the context of Swedish poetry). Jane Messer's 'Up the Highway to Campus Optus' provides insight into life-writing research methods that involve exploring the experiential world of others: in this case, the transnational corporate culture of IT. A creative writing lecturer at Macquarie University, Messer infiltrates the nearby Macquarie Business Park: 'Inside the zone, curvy, Canberra-like roadways border driveways into fields of buildings that rise above small artificial hills and carparks'. A more historical vista is explored in Catherine Padmore's 'Writing "Amye Duddley": seeking clues in books, bones and stones', which provides a valuable examination of the problems of writing historical biography, and is especially useful in its exploration of the problems surrounding marginal

figures about whom only fragmented historical records survive.

The final article in the issue, Martin Edmond's 'Memory, Voice, Occasion' -the 'big three' of the Muses in this interpretation-are here intriguingly evoked and defined through a musing on 'possession' and the reading of a photograph.

This Art of the Real special issue of *TEXT* comes 9 years after Donna Lee Brien and Nigel Krauth edited the first special issue of *TEXT* on Australian Creative Non-fiction in April 2000, preceding the AAWP 5th annual conference held in June that year and featuring a keynote address by Professor Lee Gutkind (who, as Brien notes, is a 'pioneer of the teaching of this so-called "fourth genre" in the USA'). In her editorial introduction (<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue1/intro.htm>) Brien speaks of the, then recent, advent of creative non-fiction as a label in Australia, something which carried with it the usual ambivalences around 'naming'. Almost a decade later the term has obviously stuck, although like Brien we also grappled with it in terms of it providing a useful short-hand for what is a very diverse and localised genre, behind its on-going hype as a mainstream publishing zeitgeist.

The Art of the Real conference, and the papers which form this collection, attest to the ways in which the category of creative non-fiction has been refined and expanded over the last decade in Australia. Even though representations of the real have always existed in some form in Australian writing, its labelling within an international context as the 'fourth genre', its incorporation into the academy and the rise of cultural studies have combined to produce surprising results in the development of a broad, exciting and critically-engaged local field. The conference brought together an extraordinary range of writers-historians and literary biographers, true crime writers and analysts, poets and new media practitioners-and kinds of writing-the biography, the memoir, the zine, the critical article, the television mini-series, the essay, and the exegesis. We even had one paper on Professional Wrestling fan newsletters, obviously a much over-looked art of the real.

One of our key-note speakers was the poet and memoir writer Blake Morrison (UK), whose book *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* had just been released in Australia as a feature film. Following his opening night reading, we had a session in the old Police Lock Up exercise yards, with Blake in conversation with one of our University of Newcastle post-graduate writers, Michael Sala (who is writing a memoir about his childhood and abusive fathers). Although The Lock Up has now been commandeered as a gallery space, and is home of the Hunter Writers Centre, there are still traces of its recent past. Graffiti has been left on the cell walls and the stench of urine still wafts in the night air. Part reading, part critical analysis, drawing upon both local and international influences, located in the present and haunted by history, in many ways this event characterised creative non-fiction as it is currently

practised: a genre in dialogue with and transforming its own recent past.

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