

GUIDELINES FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

Just like metaphors, models can be taken from almost any source. In order to move from the margins to the mainstream of research prestige, to be recognised outside the discipline by the rest of the academy, creative writing needs to describe the research practice of writers....It appears that there is a need in creative arts to dispel the mythology that we are unable to articulate what we do, that we are muse-ridden and irrational. (Nicola Boyd, 2008)

Creative writing is enormously rewarding but also enormously difficult. It requires intense and focused work: attention to technique; the selection and use of particularised discourses; to vocabulary; to sound patterns; to rhythm, pace, shape and dialogue; to poetic models and narrative arcs; It requires editing and reediting and rethinking and reediting...

Writing can, and should be, a rigorous and exacting intellectual process requiring constant critical appraisal, editing, re-working, testing, more editing, reflection, editing again, reworking, more editing, more reflection, more critical appraisal and so on. In arts-based practices, the process is as important as the outcome. It is not just about 'output'. (Avieson 2008)

and yet, as Tess Brady points out, in universities,

[w]e are still surrounded by a large number of colleagues from other disciplines who are unaware of the nature of our work and who think, for example, that a novel can be written in the summer break. That this belief is so prolific is an indication that we have not taken the trouble to deconstruct our research and process and to publicise that deconstruction. (Brady 2000)

These colleagues may be suspicious of the creative work: there is increasing pressure to weigh and measure creative research in more traditional academic ways. Boyd notes how

Dawson (1999) and Kroll (1999) both notice that the exegesis can provide a kind of safety zone This nervousness leads to the generation of an exegesis which is really a mini dissertation. Here the exegesis is usually steeped in literary theory and illustrates that the candidate is well versed in the language of the literary criticism and analyses. The exegesis in this instance functions as a ticket to satisfy the gatekeepers admitting entrance to the academy's conservative research club (Brady 2000)

but this doesn't demonstrate the skills of a creative writer as creative writer – it suggests that s/he must speak the academic language of literary theory and criticism in order to be taken seriously. It also has the unfortunate effect of enabling the student to use the analysis/ exegesis to explain a weak piece of writing, effectively assessing the work itself as a secondary object. Jeri Kroll points out that here the critical assessment 'functions as a kind of insurance policy against a poorly received creative product. (Kroll, 1999)

We need therefore a firmer rationale for the work, one that views the process as creative throughout. Emma Darwin's blog is an excellent starting point:

Of course, writers have always sought out mentors, thought about their craft, tried things out consciously, and observed their own process. But I do think that there aren't

many writers who would sit down on their own to make **a coherent story of the process of writing a novel, and the critical, historical and cultural context of its writing**, in as much detail as a PhD demands: you could say it's unnatural. And **yet, since part of learning to be a writer is learning to understand and manage your creative self, including your relationship to the rest of the world and its writing, then having to do just that may be very valuable in the long term too.** (Darwin)

Brady herself is both flexible and analytic:

In my own case when I came to write my exegesis there simply were some aspects of the novel, both generic and particular, which I wanted to further investigate. There were thoughts about the silencing of women and about sadness which **I wanted to look at in a different way. I had worked that territory in the novel and then wanted to work it again in the exegesis.** There were ideas to do with **research and with process** which I wanted to explore by **going back over earlier notes and drafts, by referring to what could be described as my writer's journal.** Interestingly, what I did not do is offer a critique of my own work, I did not illustrate skill with literary criticism and analyses and I did not explain my novel or illustrate how I incorporated theory into practice.

The model turns its back on the safety of description and definition. Like the creative product it is not safe, not comfortable, not predictable. And while **it might engage with aspects of literature surveys, research methodology and findings, it does so in an open-ended manner, picking and choosing and embracing incompleteness**

The main issue is that there are no hard and fast rules about the critical reflection – which is why I have found it difficult to come up with some – even though I can advise on individual work. However when the critical is allied to the creative enables a range of different responses to be incorporated depending on the kind of work you are attempting. but seeing this as a response to the kind of writing you are undertaking,

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR GUIDELINES

Emma Darwin suggests three areas focusing on learning to write a coherent story of the process of writing a novel, and the critical, historical and cultural context of its writing,

<i>Area</i>	<i>Consider</i>
1. process of writing:	craft, form and conscious experiment, observations of your own process
2. Broader context(s):	critical, historical and cultural
3. the wider world of writing:	the mentor/ the reader/ the genre;

Jeri Kroll notes a process of 3 parts (plus one about literary theory but as I have never focused on that in our sessions I have omitted this element)

<i>Area</i>	<i>Analysis and Assessment</i>
1. Consider structure	origins and possible options
2. Why certain paths were followed rather than others	Technique, establishing red herrings, challenging preconceptions?
3. set the work in a contemporary context,	Compare with the work of other writers

Bunty Avieson suggests a cycle of

<i>Account for</i>
1. Process and management of process –examining a rigorous and exacting intellectual process
2. Why certain paths were followed rather than others constant critical appraisal, editing, re-working, testing, more editing, reflection, editing again, reworking, more editing, more reflection, more critical appraisal..
3. set the work in a contemporary context – other publications traditions, new or traditional
<i>And then a return to reconsidering (1) again as part of a positive feedback cycle</i>

ALL SUGGEST A THREE-PART PROCESS

- work itself ,what attempting to do and themes concerns
- what resources feed into that attempt
- broader considerations: other writers, other books, literary historical and cultural

Avieson, Bunty, 'Writing - a methodology for the new millennium,' *TEXT*, Vol 12 No 2 October 2008 Available at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct08/avieson.htm>

Brady, T 2000 'A Question of Genre: de-mystifying the exegesis', *TEXT: The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*, Vol 4 No 1, Available at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/april00/brady.htm>

Darwin, Emma, 'This Itch Of Writing' Available at <http://emmadarwin.typepad.com/thisitchofwriting/>

Kroll, Jeri (1999) 'Uneasy Bedfellows: Assessing the Creative Thesis and its Exegesis' *TEXT* Vol 3 No 2. Available at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct99/kroll.htm>