

The writer and the bowerbird

I was recently awarded a PhD for a novel and exegesis. Writing a novel for the degree required that I kept a bibliography of my reading. This bibliography makes interesting reading in itself because it illustrates the unusualness of the novelist's research. **Unlike my colleagues in other more traditional disciplines I needed to acquire a working rather than specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of areas and disciplines.** I needed to function a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours.

To work with this metaphor, I needed to pick out the dark blue pieces of ecclesiastical history, the azure lines of cartography, the sapphire decorations of medieval manuscripts and the Nile blue theories of archaeology. **I needed to be able to write on a range of issues and yet I knew I was not an authority in any of them.**

This bowerbird researching requires its own skill. **The skill to locate quickly, sort through, and accurately select all the blue pieces. It is also the skill of knowing where to look, where to find the blue pieces** in the first place. It may sound easy but to be able to accurately and quickly isolate the turquoise from the aquamarine at one end of the spectrum and the indigo from the purple at the other, requires nerve, a great eye and a lot of know-how. **With so much information to gather, the writer needs to be able to work quickly, to know the questions to ask and to be able to isolate the essence.**

For example, I did not need to become an archaeologist in order to make use of the Ingstad (1970) research on a Newfoundland dig. **I had to know where to find the article, and then I had to take time to read it, navigating my way through the discipline's jargon. But the real time was spent thinking about archaeology. Once I had comprehended the article and its issues I needed to work out which particular aspect of it could represent the whole in a way that could be told in a novel.** I chose the hunt and discovery of the anvil stone because it was a single incident which could be retold in a dramatic manner. I also chose the importance of the design of the Norse houses, because this reinforced a thematic concern pertaining to the cultural and historical nature of perception. These were my blue bits. And in selecting them I rejected several other excavation sites and a list of artefacts that were discovered at the dig.

In addition, I was combining in my *process* both the creative and the academic. I was writing a novel and I was writing a PhD. The academic became the creative; the creative became the academic. My desk was covered with the trappings of the academy, with filing cards, photocopies, Manila folders marked 'bibliography', 'Vinland references', 'maps, other' and so on. My desk was also covered with the trappings of the novelist, with photographs and pictures, yellow stick-ons, a feather, a smooth black pebble, a list of characters, a bent and twisted paperclip, red, blue, black pens, marked-up manuscripts. But I could not maintain the division as one slid into the other and the academic and the creative processes blurred. Before long my card index file also contained details on my characters, details of the fiction, and notes on chapters. The Manila folders began to be labelled, 'chapter 4 - extra'; the paperclip was bent back into shape and held together notes on the Inanna myth.

And in my working I did not separate the two, carrying out academic work on one day and creative work on another. The two parts became each other, mixing together in swirls of colour. I would read an article on 17th century watches and think of my character Meridian holding a small watch in her hand, feeling the warmth and weight of four hundred years of women's touch. In Chapter 9 when the two main characters are in a rose garden I knew I wanted a line from a Middle Eastern poem. I didn't know what poem or what line. I left my desk and went to the library, borrowing all the books on Middle Eastern verse the library held. Back to my desk I hunted for a line that used roses. There were quite a few. I sat around with some of my colleagues discussing the poems until Hafiz's, 'The red rose is open and the nightingale is drunk' stood out from the rest (Kritzeck, 1964). The line became a corridor catch phrase and was written up on the staff noticeboard rubbing shoulders with sober notices of conferences and research opportunities.

Like marbling on paper. Into a bed of water oil paints are applied, raw colours, one after another. By running a comb through the water the oil paints are swirled together to form a marble pattern. There are blues and reds and purples where the colours have combined. There are dark shades and lighter hues folding into each other. Paper is applied and takes up the colour so that the whole, the marbling on the page is the thing we remember, not the tubes of paint containing the separate raw colours.

So too with creative writing. The academic and the creative slid into one another, nestled side by side so that one fed on the other, one became the other.

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[discusses different assessments of the exegesis]

Yet I suggest, the only aspect of the relationship that we all agree on is that the exegesis *accompanies*. And here I think we have a key.

If we take the exegesis as the accompanying document to a creative work, the needs to *explain or direct* the reading, or *illustrate* skills in literary analyses, fade from essential components into possible components. But to develop this further we need to embrace Sallis' clarity when she rightly illustrates that the same research can be written in a creative genre and in an academic genre. **The genre chosen changes and modifies the findings of the research so that what is finally presented will possess a uniqueness and clear identity.** The creative product will differ from the academic product. A dozen eggs can be turned into all kinds of different dishes; for Sallis, research about the Arab culture was turned into two distinct products - her novel *Hiam* and a scholarly text on the *Arabian Nights*.

I am not arguing here for a dualism, for a scholarly text and a creative text. I am asking that we recognise the importance of research fiction, and that both the creative work and the exegesis can stem from exactly the same research, the same concerns, and yet one is not the other. 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. Indeed the only aspect of my exegesis which talks about the relationship of theory and practice illustrates, in that instance, their incompatibility.

I took this approach as I wanted to write a lively readable document, a document which would exist in its own right, a document which might be useful or informative to the discipline. I also took this approach because I was not apologetic about my creative product. The novel stands with the authority of a work which has something to say - a piece of fiction, research - as we know it must have been.

I embraced and developed a model which celebrates the creative, privileging its discourse. **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.**

<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april00/brady.htm>