

The Female Bohemian Artist in 20th Century Australia: 'Telling what can be told'

An exegesis submitted in conjunction with a historical novel *Forty Shades of Green*, for fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Canberra.

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July 2009

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Except where indicated in footnotes, quotations and the bibliography, I certify that I am the sole author of the thesis submitted today entitled:

Forty Shades of Green, a historical novel, and

The Female Bohemian Artist in 20th Century Australia: 'Telling what can be told', an exegesis

I further certify that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. The material in the thesis has not been the basis of an award of any other degree or diploma except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. The thesis complies with university requirements for a thesis as set out in <http://www.canberra.edu.au/secretariat/goldbook/forms/thesisrmt.pdf>.

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Date: 23rd July 2009

Abstract

Title of novel: *Forty Shades of Green*

Title of exegesis: *The Female Bohemian Artist in 20th Century Australia: 'Telling what can be told'* (Byatt 2002: 102).

This PhD comprises a historical novel *Forty Shades of Green* and an exegesis *The Female Bohemian Artist in 20th Century Australia: 'Telling what can be told'*. These two components in their different ways explore my research question: what impact does historical change have on the creative expression of women artists?

In order to allow sufficient scope to examine this question, the historical novel deals with three generations of women. The novel opens in 1973 with the third generation woman, Keira Bolt, composing a photographic essay on the life of her mysterious maternal grandmother Deirdre Wild, born in 1909. She emigrated from the Great Blasket island, County Kerry in Ireland's far west. Deirdre came to Sydney, settling at Clovelly with her baby daughter Maureen. Deirdre participated in the between-the-wars art scene as a surrealist painter and collage artist.

Deirdre left Sydney just after the end of World War II and she and Maureen are estranged. Maureen is against Keira 'raking up the past' but her hostility towards the project makes Keira even more determined to find out what happened to Deirdre and why Maureen is so reluctant to talk about it.

The concept of collage is demonstrated in the novel (by the form of the novel, with different voices making up the narrative, and in the descriptions of collages in it) and examined in the exegesis. The role of gender in the understanding of a period's cultural production is dramatised in the novel and explored in the exegesis. Writing a historical novel involved much research – the history in fiction – which led to reflections on the fiction in history. Both these concepts are explored in the exegesis.

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