

# **Creativity and the Dynamic System of Australian Fiction Writing**

Elizabeth Paton

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## Abstract

Given the growing interest in fiction writing in Australia, seen in the rise in the number of festivals, writers' centres, how-to books, biographies and creative writing classes, it is surprising that very little research has been done within Australia on the nature of literary creativity itself. A review of international literature on creativity from areas such as the arts, history, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, business and education shows movement away from traditional and conventional ideas of creativity that focus primarily on the individual, towards more contextual approaches that reconceptualise creativity as the result of a dynamic system at work. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's tripartite model of creativity, which includes a field of experts, a domain of knowledge and an individual author, has been successfully applied to the arts and sciences in North America. It is argued that the systems model is also relevant to Australian fiction writing, a term which is used here to include novels in literature, popular fiction and genre fiction categories.

This thesis is primarily based on in-depth interviews with 40 published Australian fiction writers. With over 400 publications between them, the individual writers interviewed represent a broad cross section of Australian fiction categories at both the national and international level. In addition to literary writers like Carmel Bird and Venero Armanno, this sample also incorporates writers in other genres such as Di Morrissey and Nick Earls (popular fiction), Paul Collins (science fiction and fantasy), Anna Jacobs (romance), Peter Doyle (crime) and Libby Gleeson and Gary Crew (children's and young adult fiction). Although the individual writers possess unique combinations of characteristics, biographies and processes, their collective responses demonstrate common participation in systemic processes of creativity.

By analysing these responses in terms of Csikszentmihalyi's systems model, this thesis presents evidence that demonstrates a system of creativity at work in Australian fiction. The analysis of the collected data provides evidence, firstly, of how writers adopt and master the domain skills and knowledge needed to be able to write fiction through processes of socialisation and enculturation. Secondly, it is also the contention of this thesis that the individual's ability to contribute to the domain depends not only on traditional biological, personality and motivational influences but also socially and culturally mediated work practices and processes. Finally, it is asserted that the contribution of a field of experts is also crucial to creativity occurring in Australian fiction writing. This social organisation, comprised of all those who can affect the domain, is important not only for its influence on and acceptance of written works but also for the continuation of the system itself. The evidence shows that the field supports further writing as well as writing careers with many authors becoming members of the field themselves.

In sum, the research demonstrates that, rather than being solely the property of individual authors, creativity in Australian fiction writing results from individuals making choices and acting within the boundaries of specific social and cultural contexts.

## Acknowledgements

As I repeat throughout this thesis, writers never do their work in isolation. They are constantly drawing on work that has come before and interacting with people and institutions that judge and support their writing. This process has been no different.

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