

Hannah's Place: a neo historical fiction

Exegesis component of a creative doctoral thesis in
Communication

by

Elanna Herbert

ABSTRACT

The creative component of my doctoral thesis articulates narratives of female experience in Colonial Australia. The work re-contextualises and re-narrativises accounts of events which occurred in particular women's lives, and which were reported in nineteenth century newspapers. The female characters within my novel are illiterate and from the lower classes. Unlike middle-class women who wrote letters and kept journals, women such as these did not and could not leave us their stories. The newspaper accounts in which their stories initially appeared reflected patriarchal (and) class ideologies, and represented the women as the 'other'. However, it is by these same textual artefacts that we come to know of their existence.

The multi-layered novel I have written juxtaposes archival pre-texts (or intertexts) against fictional re-narrativisations of the same events. One reason for the use of this style is in order to challenge the past positioning of silenced women. My female characters' first textual iterations, those documents which now form our archival records, were written from a position of hegemonic patriarchy. Their first textual iteration were the record of female existence recorded by others. The original voices of the fictionalised female characters of my novel are heard as an absence and the intertext, as well as the fiction, now stands as a trace of what once existed as women's lived, performative experience.

My contention is that by making use of concepts such as historiographic metafiction, transworld identities, and sideshadowing; along with narrative structures such as juxtaposition, collage and the use of intertext and footnotes, a richer, multi-dimensional and non-linear view of female colonial experience can be achieved. And it will be one which departs from that hegemonically imposed by patriarchy. It is the reader who becomes the meaning maker of 'truth' within historical narration.

My novel sits within the theoretical framework of postmodern literature as a variant on a new form of the genre that has been termed 'historical fiction'. However, it departs from traditional historical fiction in that it foregrounds not only an imagined fictional past world created when the novel is read, but also the actual archival

documents, the pieces *of* text from the past which in other instances and perhaps put together to form a larger whole, might be used to make traditional history. These pieces of text were the initial finds from the historical research undertaken for my novel. These fragments of text are used within the work as intertextual elements which frame, narratively interrupt, add to or act as footnotes and in turn, are themselves framed by my female characters' self narrated stories. These introduced textual elements, here foregrounded, are those things most often hidden from view within the mimetic and hermeneutic worlds of traditional historical fiction. It is also with these intertextual elements that the fictional women engage in dialogue. At the same time, my transworld characters' existence as fiction are reinforced by their existence as 'objects' (of narration) within the archival texts. *Both* the archival texts *and* the fiction are now seen as having the potential to be unreliable.

My thesis suggests that in seeking to gain a clearer understanding of these events and the narrative of these particular marginalised colonial women's lives, a new way of engaging with history and writing historical fiction is called for. I have undertaken this through creative fiction which makes use of concepts such as transworld identity, as defined by Umberto Eco and also by Brian McHale, historiographic metafiction, as defined by Linda Hutcheon and the concept of sideshadowing which, as suggested by Gary Saul Morson and Michael André Bernstein, opens a space for multiple historical narratives.

The novel plays with the idea of both historical facts and historical fiction. By giving textual equality to the two the border between what can be considered as historical fact and historical fiction becomes blurred. This is one way in which a type of textual agency can be brought to those silenced groups from Australia's past. By juxtaposing parts of the initial textual account of these events alongside, or footnoted below, the fiction which originated from them, I create a female narrative of 'new writing' through which parts of the old texts, voiced from a male perspective, can still be read. The resulting, multi-layered narrative becomes a collage of text, voice and meaning thus enacting Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia.

A reading of my novel insists upon questioning the truthfulness or degree of reliability of past textual facts as accurate historic records of real women's life events.

It is this which is at the core of my novel—an historiographic metafictional challenging by the fictional voices of female transworld identities of what had been written as an historical, legitimate account of the past. This self-reflexive style of historical fiction makes for a better construct of a multi-dimensional, non-linear view of female colonial experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help of all those who were involved in the writing of this thesis. My primary supervisor, Maureen Bettle, for her generous supervision, willing support and good editing suggestions. I also acknowledge the support of others who read and made helpful suggestions on both the fiction and the exegesis, the other members of my supervisory panel, Hazel Smith, Auriol Weigold and from the Department of Creative Communications Francesca Rendle-Short. Fellow students of the same department are thanked also for their helpful suggestions at my seminar presentations and also the writers retreats at Jervis Bay. I thank also Karen Fisher from the Australian National University who read and made useful suggestions to both the fiction and the exegesis in their draft stages. Finally I would like to thank my family for their love and support over the four years of this thesis project especially my two daughters, Annalie and Erinne, for their enthusiasm and patience with my project.

Hannah's Place: a neo historical fiction

by

Elanna Herbert

Hannah's Place: a neo historical fiction

Chapter 1	9
We Begin Traditionally: an introduction positioned	9
Objectives of the study	9
Introduction: the novel	9
Hannah Simpson, Mary Ann Brownlow, Caroline Collitts, Maria Walsh and an unnamed Aboriginal woman	13
Reasons for choosing these particular women's stories	15
Female stories interrupt the artist's monologue	15
Justifying a methodology	16
Engaging texts	20
Style of fiction chosen	21
Family History	22
The prior 'texts': newspapers, birth, death and marriage records, Governors Despatches, shipboard diaries	24
Summing up	26
Chapter 2	29
Events and Characters Chosen—how?	29
Research and characterisation methodology	29
Stage 1: Initial sourcing of material	29
Site visits	33
Unravelling chaotic chronologies	34
Stage 2: Once the stories were decided	37
Barthes and the Camera Lucida	39
The travelling artist and his journal monologue	42
Creating the artist's character and those of his companions	44
Chapter 3	45
A Short Digression: the Picturesque	45
Mixture; roughness and smoothness	46
The Picturesque: appropriating land and labour	48
Brief discussion on the Picturesque Tour	50
Visual examples of the Picturesque style	52
Aspects of the Picturesque as applied to the structure of <i>Hannah's Place</i>	54
Narrative and propaganda	56
Lexicography for an ideology of the Picturesque	62
Chapter 4	65
A Brief Background: history and literature	65
Fiction v history	65
R G Collingwood: three rules of history	69
Liberté for the Text	70
Raw materials to be moulded	73
New Historicism: constructing the excluded	83
Chapter 5	88

Historical Fiction	88
Jarring witnesses to history	92
Return of the repressed: de Certeau and the James girls	94
Lukacs: expanding some useful definitions of and strategies for historical fiction	98
World historical and maintaining individuals	101
Historical faithfulness	104
'Never modernize the psychology of characters'	106
The temptation to produce extensively complete totality	108
"Poetic awakening": 'smaller' relationships	110
Chain of catastrophes	111
"Hostile social forces bent on one another's destruction are everywhere colliding"	112
Metafiction	114
Historiographic metafiction	115
Attempting to assimilate: revealing the process	117
A broader definition?	122
Strings of pearls	127
Chapter 6	130
Lost Archipelagos of the Past	130
Time and space: and all things nice	143
Temporal disjunction: conflicts with the illusion of time	146
Sideshadowing the past	153
Sideshadowing: as a device	157
Sideshadowing: the artist's journal	159
Chapter 7	162
We End by Ex-pressing a History of 'the Other'	162
Transworld women's stories: renewal of an ethics of history	162
Altering its form to put the other first	163
Re-ex-pressing the 'other'	168
Cultural forms and occasions for remembering the past	172
Fiction Works Cited	177
Non-fiction Works Cited	179