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Fact, Fiction and Committing Murder: some of the ethical issues associated with writing historical crime fiction

Abstract:

Since the publication of Australia's first crime novel, *Quintus Servinton* by Henry Savery in 1830, Australians have read and written crime fiction. Within the pages of the crime fiction novels and short stories that have been produced in Australia, from Colonial times to the present day, characters have routinely fallen victim to various crimes from fraud to murder. Such crimes continue to be portrayed and reported in the ever-growing markets of crime fiction novels and true crime texts around Australia and the world. The ethical issues that surround the act of committing a fictional crime, or documenting a crime that actually happened, become more complicated when the task of generating a crime driven plot is combined with an historical setting and writers begin the process of superimposing their artistic efforts over a well-known series of events, prominent historical figures and crimes that were actually committed, or crimes that were planned but not carried out. These issues are explored, through a review of some of the writing processes involved in the generation of the historical crime novel *Blood on their Hands* (an original creative work written as part of a doctoral program). This novel takes place in Sydney, Australia over a five-week period, from early April to mid-May, in 1932 and overlays the story of a fictional murder on a very real fascist plot to kidnap the New South Wales Premier of the day, Jack Lang, a man known as the "Big Fella". The review of this novel has been done in an effort to highlight some of the challenges, as well as some of the opportunities, of combining fiction and fact in the context of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's idea of the suspension of disbelief.

Biographical note:

Rachel Franks BEd (AdEd) *UTS*, BA GradDipEd (Sec) *CSturt*, MLitt PhD *CQU*. Rachel's recently completed PhD thesis explored representations of class, gender and ethical questions attendant on the act of murder in Australian crime fiction published between 1830 and 1980. She has delivered creative writing workshops and conference papers based on her research. She has also been published in the *Australian Library Journal* and *inCite*.

Key words:

Australian–Creative Writing–Crime Fiction–Historical Fiction–Ethics–Suspension of Disbelief

Introduction

Since the publication of Australia's first crime novel, *Quintus Servinton* by Henry Savery in 1830, Australians have read and written crime fiction. Within the pages of the crime fiction novels and short stories that have been produced in Australia, from Colonial times to the present day, characters have routinely fallen victim to being: bludgeoned; burned alive; electrocuted; mauled; overdosed; poisoned; pushed; run down; shot; smothered; stabbed; strangled; and violently despatched in many other ways for a multitude of reasons. Reading about killers, and their pursuers, is an incredibly popular activity with one in every three new works of fiction published in English each year being classified as crime fiction (Knight 2010: xi). In addition to these tales are the vast numbers of those books that detail actual crimes. Jean Murley has described the dramatic increase in demand for true crime works; works that entertain, inform and serve as a "scale model of modern society" (Seltzer 2008: 11), as a "juggernaut in publishing" (2008: 44). This paper explores some of the issues that writers encounter when they merge fact with fiction and the ethical challenges and opportunities for writers who generate fictional crime novels that incorporate elements from true crime cases. In particular this paper discusses some of the ethical issues that must be addressed when writing historical crime fiction and looks at the dilemma of choosing to privilege historical accuracy over creative output or vice versa.

Some of the ethical issues associated with the writing of historical fiction

The historical crime novel *Blood on their Hands* (written as part of my doctoral program at CQUniversity) takes place in Sydney, Australia over a five-week period, from early April to mid-May, in 1932. Despite the triumph of the recent opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the city is gripped by economic crisis and political turmoil. Crime, evictions, fascism, scandal and unemployment all jostle for headlines within *The Bulletin*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and other newspapers of the day. Against this background Edwina Jones, a working-class seamstress and her unlikely companion Lady Catharine Darling, an upper-class socialite, commit to investigating a series of thefts from the poor box of a local church. This fictional case is complicated by a fictional dead body, a series of fictional obscure clues and the uncovering of a very real fascist plot, designed by the paramilitary organisation the New Guard, to kidnap Premier Jack Lang: a plot that threatened to result in either the dismissal of the New South Wales Government or the start of a civil war.

The first line of Mark McShane's crime novel *Ill Met by a Fish Shop on George Street* (1969) reads:

> George Street, Sydney, is the Australian equivalent of Oxford Street and Fifth Avenue; or so they say in Sydney. Melbourne and Adelaide say otherwise. London and New York say nothing - they have never heard of George Street (1).

George Street features prominently in my novel alongside other areas of Sydney. A personal familiarity with modern Sydney and the city's history provided a platform

for understanding what Australia's oldest city would have been like in the inter-War years. Despite this familiarity a significant amount of investigation, through the careful and time consuming study of old maps and photographs alongside period magazines and newspapers, was required to ensure the historical setting of the novel portrayed Sydney as it was in 1932 and not as it stands today. The historical novelist must maintain a careful balance though, because: "The setting should be convincing, yes, and anachronisms are still things to be avoided . . . readers tend to be quite unforgiving of obvious mistakes" (Johnson 2002), however, readers also:

> [W]ant to believe, but they don't want to be confronted by the awful banality of crime as it is experienced by either real victims or real investigators. Readers of crime fiction don't want too much reality, they want closure (Turnbull 1999: 56-57).

Ensuring a crime novel's setting is presented as accurately as possible allows readers to believe in what they are reading enough to be entertained without experiencing too much reality. My task in writing an original creative work was to allow people to believe they are in Sydney and also believe they are in another time. More obvious items such as the types of vehicles people drove and the different types of clothing and jewellery that people wore were meticulously researched, as were less conspicuous items such as the types of rodenticide available in the early 1930s and shades of lip gloss that were popular at the time. Attention was also paid to how words appear on a page. For example in the 1930s, when lip gloss was new, it was presented as lip-gloss so this term appears hyphenated in the historical component of my thesis but without a hyphen in the novel's accompanying exegesis which follows contemporary conventions of grammar and spelling.

The bulk of the historical information, used to enhance the detail of my novel, was taken from primary sources including periodicals and newspapers, maps of Sydney and New South Wales from the early 1930s and photographic images of people and places in Sydney from 1932. The collections of cultural institutions also proved vital, such as customs documents held by the National Archives of Australia (Bayer Products Ltd 1929) indicating the poison thallium was available in Australia in 1932 and an old coffee tin held by the Powerhouse Museum confirmed that instant coffee was available in Australia from 1920 (Bushell's Minute Pure Coffee 1920-1935). This detail was supported by secondary sources including biographies, critical texts and general histories.

In addition, specialised data was sourced directly from relevant agencies. For example, weather reports for each day of the period of my novel were requested from, and supplied by, The Bureau of Meteorology (2008). I also sought specialist assistance when I decided that Catharine Darling's dog should become the fastest greyhound in the world when he makes his grand sprint down Macquarie Street. Research was undertaken to find out which dog held the world speed record in 1932. Future Cutlet's record of 28.52 seconds over 500 yards (The British Greyhound Racing Board 2008) was then given to a mathematician to convert into a speed that could be presented as miles-per-hour. Almost three weeks of work for one paragraph of just 72 words.

I made a point of visiting all the buildings, streets and sites that still exist today, in addition to walking all the routes described in my novel. I also created some settings including Catharine Darling's bedroom. This was done by finding a lavish art deco bedroom suite, in an antique store's online catalogue (Deco Dame 2008), printing it off and then enlarging all the images and taping them to my own pieces of furniture. Before I wrote the passages describing Catharine's bedroom I woke up, every day for a week, to burled zebrawood.

There were occasions when I had specific questions that could not be easily answered by primary or secondary sources. In these instances I made contact with relevant professionals. For example, I contacted TJ Andrews Funeral Services in Sydney's Newtown to obtain detailed information on hearses in use in the 1930s and how bodies were transported to and from the City Morgue. I also made several calls to the David Jones' Archivist's Office for details on the department store's early years. Not all of these efforts were rewarded. When I called a vintage car dealer, to enquire about the size of trunks of early model Packard motor cars, the dealer asked me what sort of Packard I wanted to purchase. I explained that I could not drive, that it was my work on a crime novel, which had generated my need to know if I could fit a corpse into the trunk of a 1930s Packard. This resulted in a very long silence and a, rather loud, disconnection. In lieu of detailed dimensions of trunks for early model Packards Robert Snook, the novel's first murder victim, was hidden under a picnic blanket on the floor, in front of the back seat of his vehicle, so the feasibility of such a hiding place could not be questioned.

I knew that The Honourable Paul Keating had been a personal friend of The Honourable Jack Lang so I wrote to Mr Keating's office requesting information I could utilise for my descriptions of Lang in the novel. I explained that books about Lang discussed his actions while he was in office, commented on his oratory skills and stated he was a very tall man but I was looking for additional details, which would allow me to bring Jack Lang to life in my original creative work. My request resulted in one of the highlights of my research, an invitation to have afternoon tea with the former Prime Minister of Australia, a man who retains the high levels of animation and quick-wittedness that made him such a formidable parliamentarian. My conversation with Mr Keating covered many aspects of Jack Lang's character not found in books, such as: how he used his hands in conversation; how he looked at people; and how he commanded the attention of a group, large or small, when he walked into a room.

Jack Lang was not the only historical figure to make an appearance on the pages of my original creative work. The Premier of New South Wales was joined by the State's Governor of the day, His Excellency Sir Philip Game, and his wife Lady Gwendolyn Game. Men of the right-wing paramilitary organisation the New Guard such as Colonel Eric Campbell and Captain Francis de Groot in addition to members of the Fascist Legion also made appearances within the novel. To maintain a high standard of historical accuracy I decided these people would be portrayed within the confines of what has been documented about their lives during the early months of 1932. All of their appearances, their dialogue and their habits are drawn from primary and secondary sources. For example, Jack Lang did eat his lunch every day at Pearson's

Fish Café with his Private Secretary while Eric Campbell and Francis de Groot did stand in the rain to watch the New South Wales Police Parade on 29 April 1932 (Stone 2005: 105, 227).

As an historical novel, *Blood on their Hands* is a type of work that is "set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience" (Johnson 2002). The decision to write an historical piece proved to be a double-edged sword because, while using historical events assisted in building a scaffold for my original creative work, the level of research required to present these events accurately far exceeded, I believe, the research that I would have needed to undertake for a crime novel with a more contemporary setting.

My commitment to historical accuracy had three motivations. Firstly, having studied history as an undergraduate and having been, metaphorically, beaten over the head with the heavy volumes of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and other great historiographers, my instinct was that if I could not reference it then it would be unethical to write it. This instinct reinforced the observation that the historical novel is at war with itself because "it seeks at the same time both accuracy and illusion" (Lee 2000). Secondly, there was a fascist plot, coordinated by the New Guard, to kidnap the Premier of New South Wales and hold him and his cabinet in an unused gaol at Berrima, a small town approximately 100 kilometres south-west of Sydney, which was frighteningly real. I wanted people to believe this because it is an important, but often neglected, part of Australian history: when Australians think of a constitutional crisis leading to a dismissal they usually think of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975 not Premier Jack Lang in 1932. The subject matter had to be handled sensitively though as the direct descendants of the men and women involved in the kidnapping plot are alive today. History is not always kind to its participants but presenting the key players, be they democrats or fascists, as accurately as possible, at least allows for an ethical and respectful handling of often controversial stories.

This approach was one that created some conflict on several occasions throughout my doctoral candidature. Some of my colleagues complained about my determination to privilege historical accuracy over creative outcome and worked to try and change my approach: particularly when the plot of my novel suffered as it was forced, often kicking and screaming, into an historical scaffold or when it was perceived that the amount of historical research I was undertaking was a "waste of time" and that I should just "get on with the job of writing". Having made a commitment to write within the parameters set by historical records I believe it would have been unethical to renege on my decision because it may have been easier or could have improved the pace of the plot. This resolve did, however, offer a significant benefit in that it allowed me to argue for the inability to segregate the suspension of disbelief.

The suspension of disbelief

The suspension of disbelief is an idea that was first explored by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) in *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Writing about the composition of poetry Coleridge suggested that his:

> [E]ndeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith (1817/1852: 442).

This idea, that we can take a fiction and merge it with a fact, applies to all forms of literature. Readers have the capacity to choose to suspend their disbelief and to believe that what they are reading, when they are reading it, is a true story. Elisa Galgut argues this is possible because there are dossiers, or sets, of beliefs and each person is able to hold multiple dossiers of belief (2002: 194). Readers who engage with the characters in my novel may know that Jack Lang lived through the political crisis of 1932, yet those same readers can also believe the action within *Blood on their Hands* and worry that the Premier will be captured and killed by the men of the New Guard if Eddie Jones and Catharine Darling do not intervene in time.

I wanted to take this idea further and argue that while readers may willingly suspend disbelief it is difficult for them to segregate those beliefs. Someone reading my novel may, temporarily at least, believe that Eddie and Catharine are fighting to save the Government of New South Wales. If I had made obvious errors, however, such as having Governor Game dismiss Premier Lang on the wrong date, a reader may be less willing to believe the fiction alongside the fact because if the fact cannot be trusted then the fiction cannot be trusted either. This is supported by Galgut who states that: "Of course, the author must do her share too: if the writing is clumsy, or the style dated, or the plot unconvincing, then it will be difficult to suspend disbelief" (2002: 194). Sue Turnbull makes the same point a little more bluntly: "Readers can get pretty picky" she writes, "if writers choose to depict a real landscape, they'd better get it right" (1999: 57).

Even before I began drafting my novel, I decided I would make every effort to "get it right": a decision I outlined to my readers through the novel's accompanying exegesis. Striving for historical accuracy generated numerous changes to the structure and style of the novel. Some of the changes I made were quite straightforward. For example, scenes involving motor cars speeding through Sydney streets were simplified because I learnt that the first set of traffic lights were installed, at the intersection of Market and Kent Streets, in October 1933 (Daley 2008): almost 18 months after the timeframe of my novel. It was disappointing that my characters were not able to run the obligatory red light during a chase scene but I made a conscious choice to maintain accuracy of the facts to facilitate suspension of disbelief for the fiction.

Other changes were more complex. For example, Eddie Jones and Catharine Darling go to a JC Williamson production of *Madam Butterfly* as part of a plan to confront a murderer. In the first draft of the novel the visit to the opera took place one week later and the women saw the *Barber of Seville*, an opera that had been studied carefully so clues could be extracted from its libretto. When the plot required the women to attend the opera a week earlier, I rewrote Chapter 16, "Socialising with Mrs Snook". I could have kept the scene as it was, a reader would have to read a theatre history or scroll

through advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, to discover that the performance in Sydney on 30 April 1932 was *Madam Butterfly* and not *The Barber of Seville*. Not making the relevant changes, however, would have reduced the overall historical integrity of the original creative work.

It sometimes seemed that the amount of historical research being undertaken for the original creative work was clouding the true focus of my project. There were times when I felt I was writing a crime novel alongside a series of short biographies, a political treatise, a review of the Great Depression, a social history and a history of Sydney. I needed to regularly remind myself to prioritise the ideal of the detective novel to avoid the trap, which some writers fall into, of producing "barely fictionalised textbooks, in which the author's need to cram all of his prodigious research into a single novel overwhelms the plot" (Johnson 2002). Had I incorporated all of my historical research into my original creative work, the novel would have very easily doubled in length.

Despite the challenges of writing an historical novel there are numerous benefits. There is the excitement that comes with solving a particular problem or locating that elusive detail and there is the satisfaction of producing an historically accurate work that also tells a story and creates engaging characters. One of the greatest benefits of writing an historical novel, however, is that unlike a text book on history, fiction allows for bias. One can label the men of the New Guard as fascists who oppose communism and democracy and not have to justify it with appropriate and neutral references: Ranke would roll in his grave.

Conclusion

Blood on their Hands is an historical detective novel that allows a reader to believe, for a few hours at least, in Eddie Jones and Catharine Darling and their adventures as much as they believe in the Great Depression and the political crisis of 1932 that brought Australia to the brink of civil war. The exegesis, that accompanied this novel, explored some of the ethical issues associated with the task of superimposing a fictional plot over a well-known series of events. That I chose to ensure historical accuracy over fictional content for my own work is not a criticism of writers who privilege fiction over fact and it does not suggest that compromising fact for fiction is inherently unethical. My own research, summarised in this paper, merely argues that to put the facts first or to put the fiction first is a decision writers, embarking upon an historical fiction project, must make. It is suggested here that the ethics of this issue lies not in the choices that writers make around fact and fiction but in writers being able to follow through on the decisions made and in the open communication of those decisions to their readers.

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