

Victoria University

Enza Gandolfo

It's all make believe: ethics, fiction and a writer's responsibilities.

Abstract

Literary critics from Leavis to Levinas (to borrow from the title of Gibson's book on ethics and the novel) and including Nussbaum, Booth and Rorty have written much about ethics and fiction. However, in discussions on ethics and fiction writing the focus has mostly been on the use of autobiographical, biographical or historical material. But what of fiction that is 'make believe', a work of the imagination: is the fiction writer exempt from ethical responsibilities?

In my own fiction writing, my aim is to tell stories that are rarely told, stories that have been hidden or censored, stories about people whose voices have been silenced, or narratives that have previously been misrepresented. While these fictions are works of the imagination – not based on identifiable living people or historical figures – this kind of storytelling, which is often engaged in challenging notions of truth and universality, raises a range of political, ethical and moral dilemmas for the writer (and often also for academics supervising postgraduate students in creative writing).

Like the Italian philosopher, Adriana Caverero, I believe that narrating others is a political act and that we are all vulnerable to how others narrate us. Beginning with this premise and with reference to some of the current debates and discussions on ethics in philosophy and literary theory, I will explore and reflect on the ethical questions, dilemmas and challenges that arise in the process of writing fiction.

Bio

Enza Gandolfo is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Victoria University. Her most recent books include a novel, *Swimming* (2009), . . . *it keeps me sane . . . women craft wellbeing*, co-authored with Marty Grace (2009), and *Inventory: on op shops*, co-authored with Sue Dodd (2007).

Keywords

Fiction writing – Ethics

In 1992 as a beginning writer, Geoffrey Wright's film *Romper Stomper* acted as a catalyst for raising a series of questions about ethics and fiction, about the ethical responsibilities of the storyteller, questions that I have continued to engage with and that have shaped my writing practice.

So I begin this paper back in the 90s.

At that time I was working as a policy officer for the City of Footscray in the west of Melbourne, developing policies to improve access to the Council's services for people of non-English speaking background (NESB). In the evenings I was a writing student at RMIT TAFE.

I grew up in Footscray, a working-class suburb with a high proportion of migrants and refugees. In the 50s they were mainly Europeans – Greeks, Italians, Macedonians and Croatians – but by the 90s many of these residents had moved to the outer west, and Vietnamese people had settled in the area.

As a child I read constantly. Initially it was a way of escaping my family, my school, and the challenges associated with being the daughter of migrants who wanted desperately to be 'Australian' but who the 'Australians' thought of as 'other' – as 'wog'. As I read, it became obvious to me that no one was telling the stories of the people in my neighbourhood. As soon as I started the writing course, I began trying to write those stories. I wanted to tell the untold stories of the lives of the people I had grown up with. I believed that those stories deserved to be told, should be told. I hoped I could write stories that would challenge people's racist attitudes, and that would encourage them to empathise with migrants and refugees.

At the Council it was my job to work with staff whose behavior was seen to be discriminating against residents of NESB. Staff who had very strong set ideas about who an 'Australian' was, what they looked like, and where they came from. They didn't like the way Footscray was changing. They were often rude to people who came to the counters, refused to use interpreter services or have material translated and were making life difficult for some residents. My job was to look at ways of changing their attitudes and behaviour. It was tough and challenging. There were obvious parallels between my job and what I was aiming to do with my writing.

When Geoffrey Wright's *Romper Stomper* was released in 1992, I was among the first to go and see it. Here was a film director making a film set in Footscray about the people who lived in the area, a film that purported to tackle the issues that needed to be tackled – racism and racial hatred.

Romper Stomper tells the story of a gang of neo-Nazi skinheads. The gang members are full of hate and always fighting. Their racial hatred is especially directed against Asians who they see as taking over their city. There are three main characters: the leader of the gang, Hando, a terrifying neo-Nazi; Davey, Hando's less vocal right-hand man; and Gabe, the young woman they both desire. It is a love triangle, and the film is partly about the relationship between these characters.

When the gang's favourite bar is purchased by Vietnamese people, Hando and Davey organise an attack and are surprised that the Vietnamese are ready and able to defend themselves. It ends badly for the trio.

Romper Stomper is a controversial movie and when it was released, critics as well as audiences were divided. David Stratton from the SBS TV program *The Movie Show* famously refused to rate the movie and said he thought it shouldn't have been made. Many found the movie too violent and criticised it for its ambivalence and its failure to offer a strong moral position. As one reviewer commented:

The protagonists are truly horrible people...by bringing us into their lives in such an intimate fashion and showing us their fears, their sense of family and, yes, their values, the audience starts to actually sympathize with them. (Taylor 2000)

Not everyone was critical of course. Some reviewers said the film was brave, that it tackled a difficult subject without sanitising it, and even Margaret Pomeranz, David Stratton's co-host on *The Movie Show*, 'extolled the film's virtues' (O'Regan 1996, p. 152).

Wright was upset by some of the criticism and defended the film in the media: 'Skinheads are not aliens. They are part of this culture, they represent something about it – exaggerated, not pleasant but nevertheless real' (cited in O'Regan 1996, p. 150).

While I found *Romper Stomper* an extremely violent movie, the violence was not my main criticism of the film. My main concern was that the Vietnamese characters remained anonymous, always 'other', unknowable and unknown, and therefore more difficult to empathise with. In the film we are only given a very brief glimpse of their world early on, when the brother of a young woman who is bashed voices his plans for revenge. However, in spite of this weakness I felt that the film had presented a strong anti-racism message: racial hatred was a terrible and terrifying force and could potentially destroy both the individual and society.

The next morning when I came in to work I found that a colleague had also gone to see the film the night before. 'Now you see what I mean. They're all out to get us,' she said.

'Who is out to get us?' I asked.

'The Vietnamese. They hang out in gangs and they are out to get us. I can't even walk around in my own suburb anymore because of the gangs of Vietnamese. And I was right to be scared; see how they acted in the film.'

This was not a new debate for us. I had been trying to get her to distinguish between a group of Vietnamese people and a gang for a while. Moreover, I had been trying to get her to acknowledge that her fear was clouding her perception. To my disappointment, she used the film as evidence to support her views. I tried the 'It's fiction, make believe, not the truth' argument too but I didn't get very far with that either.

Every viewer brings their own prejudices, their own life views to the film or the book and I am not blaming Geoffrey Wright for my colleague's racist views. However, the film and the various reactions to it triggered for me a series of questions about the way I as a writer might tell stories and my ethical and moral responsibilities to the audience, society and to myself – to my own ethics and morals.

In interviews Wright talked about his various motivations for making the film: to tell the story of the working class, the skinheads, to make the kind of film that had not been made in Australia. Though it may not have been Wright's primary motivation, it did seem that Wright had intended the film to show the futility and destructiveness of hate and racism. No film or

novel can illicit the reaction the writer/director wants from every reader/viewer, however *Romper Stomper*, I believe, had particular flaws which should not have escaped the attention of a storyteller with Wright's intention. The representation of the Vietnamese through the eyes of the skinheads perpetuated the Vietnamese's otherness, and this was never really questioned in the film.

Up until I saw *Romper Stomper* I would have said that my fiction writing lined up with my political and ethical beliefs and principles because I was writing stories about those people whose stories were untold, hidden or ignored. In *Romper Stomper*, Wright was doing exactly that by tell the story of the skinheads. Watching the film and the various reactions to it forced me to think about – not just from a crafting perspective but from an ethical perspective – how I shaped my own stories, whose point of view I told them from, how I created and presented all the characters, the language, the structure, what went in and what was left out; and, most importantly, to question and interrogate my blind spots, my particular perspective and the moral and ethical principles underlying my writing practice.

Ethics

Ethics is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as: 'moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity'. Moral principles, of course, refer to standards of behaviour but there are various views on how those standards should be set and by whom.

I am going to turn to a definition of ethics that comes from a social work text, one that I would have found useful in my days at the City of Footscray and one that seems to me is useful here:

ethics is about deciding what to do and acting on that decision...social work ethics is NOT about how to be good but how to "work well" towards the goal of social work. (cited in O'Connor et al. 2008, p. 229)

If we replace social work with fiction writing, I think this definition is a useful starting point for a discussion about writing and ethics. The question of course is: what are the goals of fiction? For me, the goal of fiction is to discover and explore human existence, to tell the stories of how people live, especially those people whose stories are largely silent or absent. This is for me part of a larger goal to create empathy and understanding through storytelling, 'to discover what only a novel can discover'.

Different theorists and philosophers take different approaches to ethics. Deontological ethics puts the emphasis on duty and action, utilitarian ethics puts the emphasis on consequences (the greatest good to the greatest number), virtue ethics places the emphasis on judgment and character (based on the virtues – charity, justice and so on), and ethics of care places the emphasis on relationship and responsibility: 'This is an understanding of ethics that cannot be confined by codes or rules but must be encountered in practice' (Hugman 2005, p. 112). It is this emphasis on practice in the ethics of care that makes it most readily applied to fiction writing.

Ethics and Fiction Writing

There has been substantial discussion and debate amongst literary critics and others as to the value and appropriateness of ethical criticism of literature. There are those who line up with the sentiment expressed by Oscar Wilde, 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all' (2006, p. 3). This view has different proponents: those who believe that moral flaws are artistic or aesthetic flaws and that a great work of art or literature will be by its very nature ethical and those who believe a work of high aesthetic quality, a 'great' work of literature, is beyond ethical criticism. On the other side of the debate stand those who would argue that literature is always engaging with moral and ethical questions. As Helen Gardner points out:

literature gives us images of human life and records human experience, it is inevitably full of moral ideas and moral feelings, strongly engages our moral sympathies, and tests our moral allegiances. (1982, p. 37)

There has been much written about life writing, memoir and biography and the responsibility of the writer to the real people whose lives they are re-presenting in their works. There are also ongoing debates about the nature of historical fiction and the fiction writer's responsibility to the historical facts, figures and events.

There has, however, been limited discussion among and by writers of fiction on the ethical questions and dilemmas arising in the process of writing fiction. And when it has been discussed it is often dismissed: 'The writer's only responsibility is to his art. He will be completely ruthless if he is a good one' (Faulkner, cited in Stein 1956). This position is not surprising considering the entrenched views about the imagination and the need for the imagination to be free, and for writers to be able to work independently, uncensored and unencumbered.

However, the imagination is never free. This is a fantasy that we cannot really believe. Of course in principle we are free to think and imagine anything we want, but our capacity and potential to imagine is influenced by our lives, our history, our culture, and our education. We are shaped by the way we have grown up and what we have experienced. When we tell stories, write poems, create images, we carry with us a particular way of seeing that is shaped by those experiences. We are all the inhabitants of Plato's cave, chained to the walls, with only limited perspective. As Toni Morrison argues, the writer comes to writing with her language full of 'hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering of people and language"' (1992, p. xiv), which she needs to be constantly interrogating.

Fiction

Claudia Mills in her article 'Appropriating others' stories' is mostly interested in 'those whose lives are used as "material"'. While my focus is less on autobiographical and biographical fiction, and more on the fiction we think of as imaginative, I do share with Mills a concern with exploring and interrogating the 'obligations authors might have to themselves, to other writers, to society, and especially to their readers' (2000, p. 196).

Even when the work is not clearly autobiographical, biographical or based on historical events, realist fiction especially, because it creates a world that looks 'real' and characters

that are believable and 'realist', does re-present our own world, or a version of it, back to us. We recognise our own experiences and the experiences of other people.

My argument that fiction writers have ethical responsibilities is based on the premise that fiction (like all art) has the power to make a difference to people's lives. Although that impact is difficult to measure, and varies of course from book to book and from reader to reader, we know that literature does have an impact on readers, because it has made an impact on us. This is the reason many of us became writers, and we desire (however unconsciously) through our writing to make an impression on others. As Joan Didion famously wrote:

writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. (1980, pp. 17-18)

In his book, *Foucault and Fiction*, Timothy O'Leary (2009) refers to the 'transformative effects' that fiction has on readers coming from its interrogation of that central question of ethics – how should we live? O'Leary takes Foucault's argument that ethics requires 'an experimental engagement with one's own modes of behavior' (2009, p. 141) so that we can understand, challenge and then possibly change. This 'experimental engagement' is what connects fiction and ethics for O'Leary:

Fiction...is experimental in the...fundamental sense that it draws the reader into a text involving their ways of seeing, feeling and judging the world themselves. Fiction does this through its capacity to present us...people, worlds, and modes of experience that, while they may not exist, are nonetheless capable of exerting a real influence on the world in which we live...In other words, it is possible that after engagement with the text or performance the recipient will no longer experience their world in the same way as before. (2009, p. 141)

It is because fiction has an impact on readers that writers have ethical and moral responsibilities. What is the nature of this responsibility and how does it impact on the writing? How do we balance the ethical with the imaginative? How do we ensure that we don't kill off the creative work by over-policing ourselves? This is the challenge: 'How to find a balance, a middle path between creativity and containment, imagination and ethics?' (Burke 2003).

Ethics and the writer

I think about the writer's ethical responsibilities as being two-fold: firstly, to acknowledge that the text has the potential to make a difference to the reader; to respect and acknowledge the power of language and the text. This is not to go overboard or to take ourselves too seriously; we know that no one poem or novel is going to change the world. However, it's also important not to be dismissive, as is often the fashion these days, and instead to be conscious and respectful of fiction's potential. Respect for one's craft and a realistic knowledge of the potential of that craft are necessary in any profession.

Ethical practice for the writing of fiction requires what O'Leary refers to as 'a reflexive attitude...in an act of self-scrutiny and self-elaboration' (O'Leary 2009, p. 141). Reflexivity is a combination of both intention and care, and can be described as:

a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and singular; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look otherwise at the same things. (Foucault, cited in O'Leary, 2009, p. 142)

This is the importance of being aware that we are like everyone else – products of the society. Where we are born and educated has shaped us in particular ways, and so our view of the world is coloured, formed and contextualised by our positioning. Therefore, there is also much that we are not seeing, are not aware of, especially when it comes to other people's experiences.

As writing will reflect the ethics or moral principles of the writer, it is important that writers rigorously question both themselves and their writing. This awareness and self-reflection requires vigilance (Gandolfo 2006), which can be described as a watchfulness: vigilance is a state of being awake to both one's conditioning and position. The task of the writer, therefore, involves:

resisting vigilantly, thoughtfully and attentively, but at the same time with total dedication, at every step and everywhere, the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal and inhuman power – the power of ideologies [and] systems... (Havel, cited in Tighe 2004, p. 53)

An ethics of care can thus be demonstrated in a person's writing practice through a commitment to reflexivity and vigilance. This awareness reflects a respect for the moral dimension of creativity:

If the process of creating is itself moral...it is because a good writer examines over and over each of the thousands of details in his story to make sure he has told the truth as best he can. It is moral because for the duration of the fiction we put aside our own lives in order to understand others better and more deeply. In this process, which always transforms the writer, there is a very important epistemological dimension, which I believe serves the society. (Johnson 2005, p. 260)

When we write fiction, we are writing stories about other people's lives, even if those people can't be identified and named. I believe that ethical practice requires the willingness to do what it takes to 'understand others better and more deeply'; once in a narrative form, this understanding can be communicated to readers.

Conclusion

There are authors whose work has been challenged by critics for being unethical and immoral. The critic is the reader engaging with the completed work. In this paper my concern has been with the nature of ethical practice. Is it possible that Wright was aware and respectful of the potential impact of his film? Was he reflexive and vigilant? It is not really possible for me to answer this question. I believe that if he had been reflexive and vigilant, he may have made a different film. But it is also possible that even with the most ethical practice, the end product has ethical and moral flaws (even according to one's own moral principles). In the end we can't always see all our blind spots or those in our work, and like people in other professions, even when our intentions are ethical, mistakes may still occur.

I haven't discussed the teaching of creative writing or the supervision of postgraduate students in this paper but I think the same issues are important. We are training students to be

writers and they are writing fiction that they hope will be published, that will be read, that will make a difference in the world. As well as issues of craft we have an obligation, I believe, to discuss ethical issues with these students.

Fiction, like all literature and art, is part of a culture and has a social function. Good art and good writing challenge our views of ourselves and other people; they present our world to us – past, present and future – so that we might see what we might otherwise not have seen. This work requires imagination, passion and independence, but it also must come with an understanding of the role that art and writing have in the world and their impact on people. The writer is a member of society and therefore has ethical and moral responsibilities. We need to take care in the construction of our own 'make believe' worlds.

List of works cited

Burke, S 2003, 'Writing and Ethical Responsibility', given as the *Gwyn Jones Lecture 2003*, viewed July 10th 2011, <<http://www.literaturewales.org/lectures/i/124023>>.

Cavarero, A 2000, *Relating narratives: storytelling and selfhood*, trans. PA Kottman, Routledge, London & New York.

Didion, J 1990, 'Why I write', in J Sternburg (ed.), *The Writer on her Work*, vol. 1, WW Norton & Company, New York, pp. 17-25.

Gandolfo, E 2006, 'The robust imagination', *TEXT*, vol. 10, no. 1, viewed June 2011, <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april06/gandolfo.htm>>.

Gardner, H 1982, *In defense of the imagination*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Johnson, C 2005, 'Ethics and literature', in SK George (ed.), *Ethics, literature and theory: an introductory reader*, 2nd edn, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland & Oxford, London, pp. 251-261.

Kundera, M 1988, *The art of the novel*, Faber and Faber, London.

Mills, C 2000, 'Appropriating others' stories: some questions about the ethics of writing fiction', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 195-206.

Morrison, T 1992, *Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination*, Picador, London.

O'Connor, I, Wilson, J, Setterlund, D, & Hughes, M 2008, *Social work and human service practice*, 5th edn, Pearson Longman, Frenchs Forest NSW.

O'Leary, T 2009, *Foucault and fiction: the experience book*, Continuum, London.

O'Regan, T 1996, *Australian national cinema*, Routledge, London & New York.

Stein, J 1956, 'Interview with William Faulkner', *The Art of Fiction*, no. 12, viewed June 10th 2011, <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4954/the-art-of-fiction-no-12-william-faulkner>>.

Taylor, D 2000, 'Review', viewed June 10th 2011, <<http://www.dvdjournal.com/reviews/t/romperstomper.shtml>>.

Tighe, C 2004, *Writing and responsibility*, Routledge, Hoboken.

Wilde, O 2006, *The picture of Dorian Gray*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.