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The planned, the surprising and the serendipitous: exploring the creative writing process

Abstract:

This paper arises out of my experience of working on a Creative Writing MA, both as a way to reconnect with a personal practice of creative writing and as a means of investigating my creative writing process. The process is a complex one and it is difficult to understand and explain how A links to B as the creative product develops. For the example examined here, I assigned the name Baker to a key character established early in the writing process. That surname was chosen for an older, authoritarian, character, and I hoped it would resonate a no-nonsense, old-fashioned, almost medieval time of guilds, expertise and authority, at odds with the more fluid and self-regulating society of today.

Some three years and 70,000 fiction words later, the naming of this character as Baker unexpectedly becomes a plot point linked to an indistinct photograph from the 1940s which shows thirteen children. Is the lead child the Baker character or not? Is the contemporaneous title of the photograph 'Bakers Dozen', no apostrophe, an acknowledgment that Baker is the leader, or is it a reference to the fact that there are thirteen children in the photograph? These questions raise complex issues about elements of the creative writing process that are planned, compared with elements that are unexpected and serendipitous. Even as I wrote about a display of historic photographs, and realised I was visualising the 'Bakers Dozen' photograph, I recognised and celebrated the affirming nature of such synergies in the writing process. It is this capacity to surprise even the writer at the point of authoring the written product that gives the creative writing process some of its visceral power.

Biographical note:

Lelia Green is an MA Creative Writing candidate at the University of Western Australia where she is supervised by Winthrop Professor Brenda Walker. She has a body of scholarly work in the area of Communications and Media Studies including a recent book, *The internet: An introduction to new media* (Berg, 2010). Her first novel, *Counsel of Death* is genre fiction and was completed in 1990, gaining an agent but not a publisher. *Nathaniel* is her second novel

Keywords:

Visceral—Surprise—Serendipitous—Unconscious—Practice-led research

In 2005 I enrolled in a Creative Writing MA at the University of Western Australia, under the supervision of Winthrop Professor Brenda Walker. The creative work arising from this period of intense research is an 80,000 word novel, *Nathaniel*. *Nathaniel* was mainly written between 2008 and 2010, almost in parallel with a scholarly monograph which had been commissioned in 2007 by Berg Publishers. That book, *The internet: an introduction to new media*, was written in 2008-9 and published in May 2010; the MA will be submitted for examination in December, 2010. The contemporaneous experience of these two writing projects underlines, for me, the differences in writing creative fiction compared with writing an academic book. This paper explores the particular nature of the creative project in terms of the planned, the surprising and the serendipitous.

Visceral creative writing

The problem with writing well and fluently in creative contexts is that thinking doesn't make it happen. Thinking is useful in prospect, in identifying the ground to be covered; and it's useful in retrospect, in understanding what's been written: but the writing itself may seem as much an act of discovery as of thoughtful construction. The actual choice of the words, and their connection with what is to be conveyed, can take the writer by surprise. It can appear as if there is no process of choice, no sifting of possible alternatives: at least, not at a conscious level. Instead, the experience is one of *Gestalt,* where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and the new understanding is grasped as in integrated insight rather than unfolding to awareness one element at a time.

The capacity of an artistic work to surprise its creator may be central to some experiences of creativity. Shelley Robinson, reflecting on her writing process in her PhD thesis, *Autobiography of Creative Writing* (2007) comments:

> The artist Cassatt captured my thoughts completely when she said in an interview, 'The best work occurs when you're almost not thinking. There's this flow that comes out of you that connects you to a deeper place' (Johnson, 2006, p. 35). I also found that it was in this deeper place that serendipity occurred. Unusually fortuitous and unexplained events, as if help from a higher power, seemed to assist me in my creative work. (187)

The idea of a "deeper place" elicits notions of an excavation of creative material, rather than the written construction of much consciously processed work, such as became familiar to me in writing *The internet*. My experience of *Nathaniel* was as if the novel were hewn from elemental material in my unconscious. This may be an experience of creative composition across diverse artistic contexts. For example, Shapcott (1997) cites musical composer Sir Michael Tippett as saying: "[T]he mandate of the artist's own nature [...] is to reach down into the depths of the human psyche and bring forth the tremendous images of things to come." Tippett's statement seems to imply that the "things to come" are nascent: they are created through the act of bringing forth. Tippett's statement raises the issue of how the artist comes to trust that the psyche is capable of delivering up such riches. It will be argued that it is this journey of learning to trust which allows the writer to experience surprise in their creative process and which delivers some of the inherent pleasure of the work.

Helen Milte Bastow has also had an experience of the unconscious bearing fruit. She talks about her process of writing a novel, with the working title of *Dissolve*, in which she had avoided interacting with, or investigating, Indigenous stories about the locales of her childhood in case they interfered with her own creative process. One day, on a guided eco-walk though the dunescape of The Coorong, in South Australia, Bastow entered an information shelter designed to tell visitors about the spiritual legends of the local Indigenous people. She writes:

> I realised that the way in which I had imagined The Coorong in *Chapter Two* of my novel was significantly related to aspects of the Ngarringjeri *Dreaming* story of *Ngurunderi*. I had unconsciously used two of the most important motifs of the *Dreaming* for The Coorong to describe the place of *my* dream: the central figure of a "black man", or "Ngurunderi", and the "Milky Way", the "resting place of Ngurunderi". The realisation of this unconscious connection was a powerful moment, which I felt in my body, as an emotional shock - or a combination of awe and relief. (Bastow 2003)

The visceral pleasure of the pertinent is a fruit of trusting the process. While there are many different ways to approach the writing process, the physical impact upon the writer is rarely acknowledged. "'How does my writing affect my body?'" asks Robinson (2007: 201), responding "My body was very much alive in the experience of my writing […] As well, my writing relaxed me. It was cathartic, and when I purged ideas onto paper, I could feel many of my physical tensions being released." (201)

A context for my own visceral experience of creative writing

Nathaniel, the basis for my recent experience of creative labour, takes as its theme issues of power, choice and autonomy in the fraught arena of underage sexuality. The year is 2002. A central motif is a Year 10 class of 14 and 15 year olds who are all below the 'age of consent' and studying Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a story in which Romeo's age is uncertain, but Juliet's is spelled out as being 13, a fortnight short of her 14th birthday. The key teenage protagonists in the novel are Nathaniel Baker and Jasmine Weiss. Nathaniel is a 14 year old boy, extremely tall, raised by his fundamentalist Christian grandparents after his unmarried, under age, mother abandoned him at birth. His domestic environment is very conservative and devoid of modern media: no television or internet. Nathaniel is regularly bullied at school but keeps this secret in case his grandparents decide to home school him, as had been the case with his mother.

In contrast to Nathaniel, the female protagonist Jasmine starts the novel as a popular member of her class. At 15, Jasmine is a Goth who lives in a comparatively privileged and media-saturated home with her independent, professional, liberal-minded divorced mother. Jasmine has been obsessed with the life of Juliet Capulet for as long as she can remember and celebrated reaching the age at which Juliet died by learning every word of Juliet's role in Shakespeare's play. Consequently, Jasmine feels

betrayed when her best friend wins the part of Juliet in the class production of Act I Scene V, where Romeo and Juliet first meet. The result of the conflict between Jasmine and her friend sees Jasmine gradually excluded from her usual social circles and thrown into the company of the other class outcast, Nathaniel. Other relevant characters in the novel include Mark Pender, a sexually predatory English teacher; David Henley, a teacher stood down after being accused of creating paedophile materials by photographing his naked children and Amanda Steile, the relief teacher, who stands in for David Henley and is also the replacement Year 10 form teacher in Nathaniel's and Jasmine's class.

One of the most agitated and expectant days of my life occurred on 19 May 2010. I was on a writing retreat, in this instance without fellow writers, in a self-funded cottage at the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in Western Australia. It was the third time I'd sought refuge from my everyday life to deal with the most challenging part of my nascent novel: a major sex scene. The two previous occasions had been at a week's Freefall workshop with Dr Barbara Turner-Vesselago in October 2009, and a five day women's writing retreat with Dr Sally Knowles two months later, in December. On each occasion I had been certain that the events I feared to write would be captured on paper. Instead of progressing to the crux of the story however, those two periods of intense and productive engagement had seen the plot impeded with unforeseen complications. I experienced a rising uncertainty about whether I was able to deal with my narrative process, which seemed determined to frustrate the novel's design. I was no longer certain even as to which characters would have sex at the school camp, an event which had been foreshadowed some 50,000 words earlier.

As the scene finally unfolded, between two likely but not inevitable characters, and over some 2,500 words, it was impossible for me to sit still. The tension was too hard to bear seated. I'd write a line of dialogue and jump up, pace around the cottage; open the door and stand on the step breathing deeply; stretching my muscles as if about to execute a 50kg Romanian Deadlift. Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain (2004: 232) argues that "Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words […] the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt." Twain was discussing the experience of a reader, but what is true for the reader is magnified for the writer. An intensely right word can propel the author to the dictionary, checking, just to be certain that the word is as right as it seems. Where did it come from? How did it arrive when it was needed? The realisation that the word is apt delivers a physical jolt: the electricity of Twain's observation.

When I fund myself writing: "'Not so fast', he murmured, making a liar of himself, his hands secretly on the condoms, placing them carefully in a crenellation of the headstone", I had to stop. I found myself shaky as I looked up the meaning of 'crenellation', to be sure that it could convey 'an indentation' (*Webster's* 1913). Given that it sufficed, and the date of its attribution, I suspect I owe 'crenellation' to a passionate engagement with Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* series when I was ten. The word had sat unused in my conscious for maybe forty years, waiting to be pressed into service. Krauth (2010) cites Yuasa as suggesting that "the mind-body acts of itself, creatively and spontaneously, without explicit awareness of the what,

why and how". For myself, when my mind and body combine to facilitate writerly creation, it is a visceral event. This is much less true of everyday scholarly writing. Although there were times when I was excited by writing a passage in *The internet*, and although I worked particularly hard on some passages, such as the story of Alan Turing, and the rise of Google, these aspects of the work were satisfying without being surprising. It is only in creative writing that I surprise myself.

Unconscious surprise, or serendipity?

Clearly, writing is a conscious activity. T. S. Eliot (1935: 18) argues that good written composition is critically dependent upon deliberate and painstaking editing and review:

> [T]he larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative. I maintain even that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism; and […] some creative writers are superior to others solely because their critical faculty is superior.

Such corrective work is unquestionably important, but the results of critical editing are less surprising to the author than are the first fruits of the work of imagination and creativity. It is the creative process that plumbs the psyche, and which is explored here. The use of terms such as 'unconscious', 'surprise' and 'serendipity' does not imply closely-defined psychological or psychoanalytical meanings: instead these references serve to signal whether the writer's locus of engagement is internal or external; choice or chance.

There are many reasons to believe creative writing harnesses the unconscious in ways which surprise the writer. "When I take the time to activate my imagination", says Robinson (2007: 125), "I am often surprised by what is inside of me." Comments from other authors also appear to suggest that, at its best, writing can seem to benefit from "help from a higher power" (Robinson 2007: 187). John Gardner (1991: 51) discusses Homer's stated debt to his Muses, and comments that: "we often hear even modern writers speak of their work as somehow outside their control, informed by a spirit that, when they read their writing later, they cannot identify as having come from themselves." His subsequent comments locate the creativity firmly within the writer however, saying that such an experience "testifies to the remarkable subtlety of fiction as a mode of thought. The fictional process is the writer's way of thinking." (51) Perhaps it goes without saying that this may apply to the fictional writer, but not to the writer of scholarly works. Certainly, my own thinking about *The internet* was much less surprising to me than my thinking through of *Nathaniel*.

Frieman comments on the "chaotic, unstructured, irrational, mysterious and disconcerting" nature of writing creative texts, saying that the "fragmented and irrational creative process elicits a sense of openness and possibility, of accessing the 'unknowable'" (Freiman 2001). Frieman's experience is in line with expectations arising from Sarnoff Mednick's work. Mednick, a psychologist, conducted an early

investigation into the psychological basis of the creative process. He argues for the importance of unconscious association as a foundational characteristic of creativity and justifies this partly on inductive grounds, as a result of studying autobiographical accounts of creativity, such as this reflection by Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "Facts which sank at intervals out of conscious recollection drew together beneath the surface through the almost chemical affinities of common elements" (Mednick 1962: 220). Even so, it is Mednick's view that "an individual without the requisite elements in his response repertoire will not be able to combine them so as to arrive at a creative solution" (1962: 222). Thus the writer's experience of their unconscious as a source of creativity is not available to everyone. It only happens for those people with an adequately stocked "response repertoire", prepared to allow facts, ideas and insights to emerge from below "conscious recollection". Recognising the authenticity and truth of the products of this process, the bringing forth of the unknowable but intuited, is one of the pleasures of successful creative effort.

Defining the creative process as the "forming of associative elements into new combinations which either meet specified requirements or are in some way useful", Mednick (1962: 221) differentiates the creative from the original. He notes that 7,363,474 is an original answer to the question 'How much is 12 + 12'; but not useful, and thus not creative. With creative writing, the challenge is to progress a story in a coherent way, and in keeping with the characters involved, while maintaining interest and involvement and avoiding the predictable and the humdrum. In my experience, it is the unconscious workings of creativity, beyond the purview of rational thought, which afford the kinds of surprises that register a visceral shock in the writer.

My own example of this associative chemical affinity is that of the sudden appearance in my text of a reference to the 'Bakers [no apostrophe] dozen'. At this point in the story, Nathaniel Baker has finally arrived at the Year 10 school camp based in an old orphanage on the outskirts of Perth. His friend Jasmine finds him in the archive room looking at a faded, sixty year old photographic image from the time of the Second World War:

> A tall young man stood alongside two rows of smaller children; each holding a shovel, hoe or rake. The poor quality of the photo meant the details were obscured, but the grim faces exuded a sense of oppressed misery. In place of a farm implement, the teenager carried a baton tucked under his arm, something like a drill sergeant major. *Bakers dozen*, read the caption, *ready to do their patriotic duty*. "I think that's my grandfather," he whispered.
>
> Jasmine stared at the photo. "It's hard to see much," she said. "Do you know he was here?"
>
> Nathaniel shook his head. "He never talks about his childhood. He married my Nan when he was over forty. It's like his life started then."
>
> "Could be a coincidence. There's that leader-kid and twelve others. In the old days they used to say thirteen was a bakers' dozen. You know, 'buy twelve, get one free'." She shrugged, then looked at him: "So what? What does it matter?" She saw the tears well in his eyes and turned away. "Get a grip" she said. Looking back: "it isn't all about you, you know."

This passage took me completely by surprise. Right up until the argument this plot turner precipitated it was quite possible that Nathaniel and Jasmine would be the characters who got to make out during the school camp. Instead, the ‘Bakers dozen’ insight created a completely new dynamic. In line with Mednick’s suggestion, I’m happy to believe that an unconscious associative connection explains the introduction of ambiguity over whether Nathaniel Baker’s grandfather led a work gang of a dozen young boys; or whether there was a team of thirteen boys, one of whom may or may not have been Nathaniel’s grandad. What remains unclear to me is why I chose the name Baker some 70,000 words earlier. Maybe that was the moment of serendipity.

Practice-led research

In seeking to identify a foundational methodology for their scholarship, creative researchers have paid particular attention to the theory and processes of practice-led research (Haseman 2007). “[W]riting often seems a serendipitous experience, an act of discovery. People start out writing without knowing exactly where they will end up; yet they agree that writing is a purposeful act,” comment Linda Flower and John Hayes (1981: 377) in one of the classic papers about the development of knowledge and understanding through the practice of writing. In line with this perception, Grace Paley offers the insight that writers write to find out what they want to say: “[W]rite what you don’t know about what you know.” Thomas Shapcott (1997) cites this Paley quote alongside American poet Theodore Roethke’s view that he must “learn by going where I have to go”. According to these perceptions of the writing process, writing is a deliberate experiment in creating future understanding: “the writer is somehow projecting this process of getting ‘it’ down into the future” (Shapcott 1997).

The Australian Research Council defines ‘Research and (experimental) Development (R&D)’ as comprising “creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture, society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.” (ARC 2010) The use of the word ‘systematic’ here might appear to exclude any reliance upon the unconscious. However, where there is a systematic approach to harnessing the unconscious the onus for compliance with this definition moves from a focus on the process to a consideration of the outcome. Such research requires reflective practice, yet the reflective practice of creative writing may mandate the suspension of conscious thought and require a willingness to engage the unconscious below the level accessible to self-reflection.

Practice-led research usually includes an exegesis. This allows the creative research to escape the circularity implied in the awareness that a creative writer knows what they don’t know they know; and discovers this incipient knowledge through writing it into consciousness. However, the requirement to construct a critical exegesis fails to fully address the visceral nature of the creative process, when so much of what is effective in that process is a surprise to the practitioner and can only be analysed retrospectively. Robinson, in her writer’s journal, notes of her preparations for work: “There was a certain serendipity, as like a carpenter gathering his/her tools and

materials, everything was coming together just waiting for me to write" (2007: 115). The preparation of the creative writer for the process of creative writing combines the deliberate with the unconscious and it behoves the artist to acknowledge that "one's only certainty [is] the wisdom of uncertainty" (Kundera, cited in Bastow 2003).

The surprise and visceral excitement when that uncertainty resolves itself into something which is "intensely right"tends not to be fore-grounded in discussions of practice-led research, but it seems to me to be central to the experience of writing fiction and almost entirely absent from the experience of scholarly writing within a disciplinary canon. Maybe the search for appropriate creative research methodologies needs to revisit the possibility that experiential and phenomenological research approaches can offer value to the writer-researcher.

In describing the creative writing process as both confounding and affirming, from the perspective of the practice-led researcher who is a creative writer, this paper suggests the complexity of the experience of research through writing. In particular, the element of their writing which authors may most wish to understand and explain is sometimes the writing that delivers a visceral thrill. This is also the writing that is least accessible to critical analysis, working instead at an unconscious, and possibly cellular, level (Krauth 2010). In paying credence to the external influence of serendipity, and the internal workings of the unconscious, the researcher may be required to acknowledge that predictability and straightforward explanations are lacking. Indeed, while Mednick's (1962: 221) '12 + 12' test of creativity failed to equate to originality, given the uselessness of '7,363,474' as an original answer to that sum, 12 + 12 might sometimes equal 26 rather than a more conventional 24. This could happen if we believe we are talking about dozens, rather than 12s, and if the dozens concerned might possibly pertain to bakers.

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