Deakin University

Sif Dal

Identity in a Flash: 'Smásaga', flash fiction and Icelandic-Australian Identity.

Abstract:

Flash fiction offers an effective method for investigating identity by mimicking the process of compiling memory-flashes (stories from the characters' lives) into individual narrative identities (McAdams, 2011). Additionally, the author's own narrative identity influences his or her creative work, and so, where the author identifies with more than one culture, adapting the writing traditions of one culture to the context of another can pose a considerable challenge. Language may be translated, however, cultural references and practices are not so readily transplanted.

Researchers have found traditional Icelandic literature employs certain tactics of ambiguous reality (Clunes-Ross 2002; Byock 1992; Holm 2005), which, in other cultural contexts, might make little sense and be considered fantasy. Flash fiction is uniquely positioned, with its hallmark brevity and ambiguity, for adapting traditional 'smásaga' (very short stories) for a broader global readership.

This paper will contend that flash offers a unique format for investigating and presenting identity, as it allows the writer to focus on pivotal and poignant moments of experience to illuminate that which is core to the character's being; their thoughts, their reactions, and their experiences.

Biographical Note:

Sif Dal is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at Deakin University. Her flash fiction stories have been published in several anthologies, including *Lost Children* (2011) and *Tales from the Upper Room* (2010, 2011, 2014). She is currently researching flash fiction and its uses in creating and revealing narrative identity.

Keywords: Flash fiction, Short-short stories, Microfiction, Narrative identity, Narrative intelligence, Transcultural writing, Narrative theory, Ambiguity

Introduction

What is it writers do? Primarily writers write the human experience. Certainly, some attempt to write from outside the human experience, from the perspective of animals or inanimate objects, but even then we animate our protagonists with perceptions, emotions and motives recognisable to humans, because these are what we know and what we identify with. The committee for the 2012 Conference of Narrative Matters, in Paris, stated that:

> Narrative has a profound impact on our understanding of what it means to be human; of the choices we make as persons; of the nature of health and wellness, teaching and learning; of the meaning of history; of how social groups work through conflict; and of how the cultural and political world is ordered (Turner 2013, 1).

Mark Twain is quoted as saying, 'Write what you know.' And so, we write what we know of what it means to be human.

Bruner argues that narratives are susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences (2004, 694); we learn how to create narratives based on our cultural background and our life experiences and language. Culture, interpersonal experiences, and linguistic understandings also inform what it is to be human. For writers who have grown and developed within a single culture and language, the conventions of narrative they internalize will be uniform, or conventional, for the culture in which they are writing. However, with increasing globalization, more writers write from a blend of cultural influences, often needing to solve the problems of combining two or more sets of narrative practices, or translating one cultural approach into a second linguistic tradition.

This paper will explore the means by which writers can develop and communicate transcultural identity through the investigation of narrative theory and memory, especially as developed in narrative identity theory, and through presenting the formal similarities between 'flash fiction' and Icelandic *smásaga*[1]. It will use, as an example, my experience as an Australian-Icelandic writer and the approach I have taken to traverse the cultural gap between what it means to be an Australian writer and an

Icelander. In particular, this paper will focus on how the genre of flash fiction may be used effectively to communicate the human experience in a memory-like format—poignant and pivotal moments in the characters' experiences, freed from excessive exposition, raw with emotion, like flashes of memory—and how it simulates the Icelandic narrative tradition of *smásaga*. Aldama (2013) writes that 'Flash fiction is a result of the willful expression of and engagement with our [authors and readers] socio-biologically grown emotion/cognitive system to recreate real life experiences' (25). Further, the innately ambiguous nature of flash fiction will be discussed, illustrating how it simulates the ambiguity associated with traditional Icelandic *smásaga*, which do not question the existence of elves and trolls, co-existing with humans in another, often hidden, dimension.

Writer Identity

As a transcultural writer, Carol Suarez-Orozco's (2004) words aptly sum up the cultural quandary explored in this paper. She writes, for the children of immigrants 'forging a sense of identity may be their single greatest challenge… Is their sense of identity rooted 'here,' 'there,' everywhere, or nowhere?' (176). Throughout my life, including periods living in Australia, Iceland and Norway, I have felt the need to adjust and readjust my sense of identity and belonging, as well as modify my approach to narrative in order to encapsulate and incorporate the varying influences that have been integrated into my identity. To write what I know, means to resolve the problem of who I am in this moment and communicate many diverse cultural, interpersonal and linguistic influences, in a format accessible to readers who do not share the many facets of my identity.

What does it mean to be an Australian writer? Jo Case (2011) discussed this issue at length in her article, 'Aborigines, Sharks and Australian Accent: On Australian Writing'. She interviewed a range of Australian writers, publishers and editors on the topic of being an Australian writer. In the wake of the debate, initiated by Angela Meyer on Crikey's LiteraryMinded blog, where she accused the 2011 Miles Franklin Award of defining Australian writing too narrowly—as 'sheep stations, war and colonisation'—writers were encouraged to express what being an Australian writer meant to them. Jo Case recounts Robert Dessaix stating, at the Adelaide Writer's

festival in 2010, that in a globalized world there is no such thing as Australian writing, and that he writes about himself, 'not Aborigines and sharks'.

Interviews with others revealed that author, Charlotte Wood (*The Children*), suggested Australian writing is more about the Australian accent then actually being Australian. Author, Patrick Allington (*Figurehead*), said he likes to write about the tyranny of distance, which is unique to the Australian experience. While author, Sophie Cunningham (*Bird*), was frustrated that 'rural culture is where all the authenticity is happening'. President of the Booksellers' Association, Jon Page, wrote, 'I think the 'Australian Voice' is a multicultural one and an urbanised one' (Case 2011). Case's article highlighted the challenges of defining Australian writing in terms of themes, language or particular narrative practices.

In her chapter, 'Formulating Identity in a Globalized World', Suarez-Orozco (2004) suggests identity, as a particular nationality, may not become obvious to a native of a culture until they leave their culture (177). This may explain why, as an Australian-Icelander, it is easier to recognize my Icelandic narrative practices, in contrast to what is available to me as an Australian writer.

In recent creative work, I have focused on narratives based on stories from my extended family. While these narratives are more fiction than biographical, life narrative theorists, such as William L. Randall and Jerome Bruner, argue that, 'life as led is inseparable from life as told' (Bruner 2004, 708). They contend, 'what we read, we could say, are the 'texts' of our memories … And what might we read these thing for? … for the plot, characterizations, themes, and the meaning' (Randall 1999, 23), which can be readily applied to family based fiction. Indeed, they may be applied to any character-driven fiction, as fictional characters tell their life-narratives in the same ways real life narrators do. These fictionalized family stories help to inform and influence my personal life narrative; refining my sense of identity in the context of my family and internationality, as well as my place in a wider, globalized, society.

Narrative Identity: Creating the life narrative

Phillip Hammack contends that identity can be formed through the development of a coherent and credible life story within a cultural surround, or as a reflection of master narratives of the groups an individual feels he, or she, belongs to (Oxford Scholarship

Online, 2010). The retelling of family stories in the form of flash fiction (flashes of memory), from the lives of the individuals within an extended family, offers insight into familial culture; the roots from which an individual has grown. When the narratives are written in a format that translates a traditional storytelling mode, of the family's dominant culture of origin, into a secondary cultural tradition, it serves to strengthen the connection to culture-based identity.

Dan McAdams (2011) describes narrative identity as:

> … an internalized and evolving story of self that provides a person's life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning. Complete with setting, scenes, characters, plots, and themes, narrative identity combines a person's reconstruction of his or her personal past with an imagined future in order to provide a subjective historical account of one's own development, and instrumental explanation of a person's most important commitments in the realms of work and love, and a moral justification of who a person was, is, and will be (100).

Psychology-based narrative identity theories began to be formulated in the 1980s, when systematic procedures and frameworks were created to explore the meaning of the stories people create for their lives. McAdams states, many narrative identity studies:

> … have sought to link content and structural dimension of native identity to other consequential features of a person's psychological make-up, such as personality traits and motives, developmental stages, psychological wellbeing, depression, and important life outcomes (2011, 101).

He goes on to argue that it is difficult for individuals to form a united identity with a singular purpose, but rather that they form fragmented and multi-faceted identities. McAdams cites Hubert Hermans, whom, he argues, conceives of narrative identity, 'as a polyphonic novel within which different voices of the self (akin to characters in a story) express themselves in their own unique and self-defining ways' (2011, 102).

Hermans' concept, of a polyphonic novel, may be extrapolated out to include an anthology of flashes comprised of narratives collected over a lifetime of family stories. The stories shared within a family, come together to form a multi-faceted and fragmented family identity, which may be different for each member of the family, but will likely exhibit common themes, such as the values or understandings within the family's culture.

In *Family Stories and the Life Course: Across Time and Generations*, Pratt and Fiese (2004) investigate the impact of sharing family stories. This investigation is cross-generational, but also looks at the individual life span. Pratt and Fiese identify important aspects of stories:

> First, story telling is an act, through the process of which children learn to become competent narrators. Second, stories also have a message, such that children and adults may receive valuable lessons from them, often ones consistent with cultural mores. Finally, stories aid in the creation of a personal identity that evolves over time and integrates lived experiences with meaning-making processes (1).

It is this bringing together of concepts of identity, family culture, and narratives which interests me. Sánchez (1999) argues families employ shared storytelling to transfer important knowledge and skills to younger generations, promoting 'culturally internalized and historically transformed set of knowledge and problem-solving skills needed to survive within a particular social environment' (352). Gaining an overview of my family's culture and narrative themes, through its stories and developing an understanding of self and shared themes with the wider family, partly underpins my motivation for writing an anthology of flash fiction based on family stories. This also provides an understanding of the way in which hearing family stories has influenced my own narrative style and attraction to flash fiction as a practice.

Baddeley and Singer (2007) explain how an individual's stories are embedded in a social matrix passed down from family and culture; the individual is motivated to develop their own stories in coherent forms that both they and others in their culture can understand. As an Australian-Icelandic writer, who has inherited Icelandic narrative

traditions through familial culture, but lives in Australia and writes for predominantly English reading audiences, it is important to traverse the cultural gap by simulating learned traditions of Icelandic narration (in this case *smásaga*, which will be described later in this paper) through the practice flash fiction writing.

The Life-Narrative Advantages of Flash Fiction Writing

Flash fiction, also known as, Short-shorts, Sudden Fiction, Smoke Long Fiction, Micro-fiction, Minute Fiction and many other forms (Chantler 2009; Howittt-Dring 2011; Nelles 2012; Tansley 2013), is fiction generally considered in scholarly circles to be under 1000 words. Even though the upper limit is 1000 words, many Internet publishers of flash (where flash enjoys great popularity) prefer lower limits, pushing the envelope on writing very short fiction for greatest impact. The annual 'National Flash Fiction Day' competition, for example, calls for submissions of up to 100 words (National Flash Fiction Day, 2014). The Australian writing webzine, *Seizure*, accepts submissions of between 50 and 500 words, for its flash fiction page, *Flashers* (Seizure Online, 2014).

Nelles (2012) and Aldama (2013) argue that flash fiction can be distinguished from short stories in several ways besides length. There are discernable differences in how characters, timeline, and conclusions are managed. There is a stripping back of exposition to intensify emotional and psychological reactions in the reader, for example, through an emphasis on an epiphanous ending, which dominates the narrative in word count and emotional impact, or through the careful selection of language to evoke recognisable tropes of a particular culture.

Nelles argues that flash fiction exhibits several traits, which distinguishes it from short stories. These include:

- A higher incidence of external narration.
- Big actions, more dramatic changes in a short space.
- Characters are less well delineated, as circumstances are centre stage.
- Little wordage is employed describing settings.
- Narrative tends to describe moments in time, rather than years.

- Tend to incorporate more intertext references, such as character already known to the reader.
- Endings are more important in flash fictions, there is usually a greater sense of closure and more often the use of surprise endings (2012, 91-97).

The communication of identity, in flash fiction writing, can be found both in what is included and what is omitted. Chantler (2009) writes, 'the best short-short writers know that what is unsaid is as important as what is said' (47). While longer narratives are quite capable of expressing or evoking identity, flash fiction most closely mimics the act of life-narration wherein, if asked to say something about who one is, most people will launch into a context-ambiguous anecdote from their life to 'show' how they see themselves. These anecdotes strip away exposition, irrelevant 'scenery', and background information to get to the heart of the subject, the human experience.

Beyond investigating my own identity, I also seek to engage the reader in questioning and meditating on the topic of identity, through recognition of experiences of my characters or, conversely, through experiencing a sense of otherness. Ashley Chantler's asserts that, 'the best short-shorts are those where the reader is prompted to question and to write the unwritten' (45). This form of co-creation, between the writer and readers, empowers the reader to reflect on their own understandings of what it means to be human within their specific realm of cultural, linguistic and experiential influences.

In flash fiction, as in life-narrative creation, the emphasis in narrative is on theme (what the Russian formalists call *fabula*), and discourse (*sjuzet*). As Jerome Bruner (2004) explains:

> The timeless *fabula* is the mythic, the transcendent plight that a story is about: human jealousy, authority and obedience, thwarted ambition, and those other plights that lay claim to human universality. The *sjuzet* then incorporates or realizes the timeless *fabula* not only in the form of plot but also in an unwinding net of language … To achieve such epiphanous and unique ordinariness, we are required, as Roman Jakobson used to tell his Russian poets, to 'make the ordinary strange' … And that must not depend upon the plot alone but upon language. For language constructs what it

> narrates, not only semantically but also pragmatically and stylistically (696).

The forthcoming discussion of ambiguity will explain how the Icelandic *sögur* rely heavily on cultural understandings of metaphysical possibilities. These would not translate well into English and would be perceived as fantasy, but via the use of the innate ambiguity built into the writing of flash fiction, the decision of what is fantasy and what is possible is left up to the reader to decide, as it is in Icelandic *smásaga*. Thus the use of fabula and sjuzet, in flash fiction, approximates the tradition found in Icelandic *smásögur*. Through the translation of an Icelandic writing tradition into the genre of flash fiction, written in English, the writer is able to traverse the gap between two cultural practices and meet the goal of impacting 'the understanding of what it is to be human' (Turner 2013, 1).

S*másaga* exhibit all the same traits as flash fiction, listed above, therefore flash fiction offers a useful mode by which to traverse the cultural gap between being Australian and being Icelandic. In addition, the less well-delineated characters and the lack of setting description, simulate the tradition of ambiguity in Icelandic narrative practice.

***Smásaga* and Ambiguity**

Many of the traits of flash fiction can be identified in the story of Grímsborg, an example of Icelandic *smásögur*. The story of Grímsborg (Powell & Magnússon, 1864, 33-34) is under four hundred words long, and tells the tale of starving farmers who beg the elves to end their famine by beaching a whale. The elves respond to their plea favourably.

This tale bears all the traits described by Nelles, as mentioned above. The story is told in third person. There is a major event: the farmers are saved when the elves beach a whale at the farmer's plea. The characters are less delineated: the farmer is only described as 'the farmer of Keta', his physical appearance and personality are not described at all. The narrative describes the moment where the farmer addresses the rock in which he believes the elves reside, as well as the moment when the men at the farm discover the beached whale the following morning, but the time between these two moments is not dwelt on at all. The intertextual reference in this story is the name

of the farm, Keta, and its placement in the North Country near a 'high and steep rock, named Grímsborg' (33), which would be a recognisable geographical landmark to the native readers of this story. Finally, though non-native readers of the story might consider this a fairy-tale, Icelandic readers would be more likely to set this in an historical, and fact-based, context and, therefore,ß would marvel at the elves responding positively to the plea. The finding of the whale the next day, would be considered confirmation of the existence of elves.

Icelandic *smásögur*, besides being short enough to be compared to flash fiction, also tend to have a high incidence of external narration, drama, and flat characterisations. They tend to deal with very short periods of time, rather than extended scenes, have intertextual references, at least for native readers, and they employ surprise endings to pique readers' interest.

The ambiguity in Icelandic *smâsögur* arises from the acceptance of metaphysical events, which might, in Australian culture for example, seem fantastical. Icelandic storytellers do not shy away from blurring the lines between reality and fantasy (Clunies Ross 2002). In his essay, 'Eccentric Islands: Travels Real and Imaginary', Bill Holm (2000) describes Icelanders as 'literary fundamentalists', arguing that Icelanders will stand by the accuracy of anything described in the sagas, or in their literature in general (185). This is further supported by Jesse Byock (1992) who quotes a well-respected major academic, Finnur Jónsson, who wrote, in 1923: 'I will uphold and defend the historical reliability of the sagas, however 'grand' this may sound, until I am forced to lay down my pen' (54). Emulating this ambiguity within a more pragmatic culture becomes problematic unless the writer is able to leave the decision about what is real and what is fantastical up to the reader.

In my writing, I have employed these characteristics, common to both flash fiction and Icelandic *smásögur*, as a way of integrating my inherited cultural traditions of narration. I have chosen to write narratives, which, while succinct, deal with poignant or pivotal moments in the characters' lives. In the flash titled 'Hypnogogic', the main character, who is not defined other than by her sex, is caught in a state of waking in which she is between the possibilities of a dream state and the harsh reality of her life. The reader is offered the intertextual reference of an empty bassinet as clue to this woman's suffering: 'the sun reached callously across the room to touch the empty bassinet' (Dal 2013), but the reader is not given the background story, as to why the bassinet is empty,

leaving this for the reader to decide. This state of ambiguity is common to flash fiction, but also to Icelandic *smásaga*, where the receiver of the story must decide whether the whale the Keta farmers found on the beach was a coincidence or whether there are really supernatural creatures in nature willing to hear a farmer's plea.

The characteristics of flash fiction narration were taught to me even before I encountered the term 'flash fiction'. As Peterson and McCabe (2004) explain:

> There is no such thing as a born storyteller. Rather, narrative skills are shaped by many influences, and one of the most important is the sort of habitual verbal interaction that takes place between parents and children … Large differences have been documented in the sorts of stories that are told by people who belong to different cultures (27).

While flash fiction, particularly as described by Nelles, is not exclusive to Icelandic narrative practices, it can certainly be argued that my own practices have been influenced by the hearing and reading of Icelandic narratives which closely relate to the flash fiction writing format.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have briefly discussed identity in relation to flash fiction and personal narrative identity, which serve to impact the wider understanding of what it is to be human. I contend that flash fiction offers a unique format for investigating and presenting issues of identity generally, and can be used as a solution to the problem of writing the transcultural human experience, from the perspective of an Australian-Icelandic writer. Specifically, as it allows the writer to focus on pivotal and poignant moments of experience to illuminate that which is core to the character's being: their thoughts, their reactions, and their experiences, while practicing a written approach which simulates tradition Icelandic practice.

In my own writing, flash fiction not only serves as a preferred method of expressing identity, because it heightens focus on pivotal moments of development and understanding, but bridges the gap between the storytelling traditions passed down to

me from my family and Icelandic culture, and that of my English-speaking Australian/global culture. The ambiguity of flash fiction mirrors the ambiguity of Icelandic *smásaga*. I employ flash fiction's inbuilt ambiguity for the purpose of sharing remembered 'flashes', from my family's history, while narrating my sense of self.

The practice of writing flash fiction can be employed to investigate deeper understandings of individual or community identity, without the distraction of extraneous exposition. Moreover, it offers enough ambiguity to allow the reader to co-create and interpret stories and to gain insight to their own identity, either in contrast to, or through recognition in, what is read.

Works cited

Aldama, Frederick Luis 2013. 'Flash Fiction of the Latin/o Americas - Another Approach'. *Alter/nativas*, 1, 26.

Baddeley, Jenna & Singer, Jefferson 2007. *Charting the Life Story's Path: Narrative Identity across the Life Span*. Clandinin, D. Jean. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Bruner, Jerome 2004. 'Life as Narrative', *Social Research*, 71, 3.

Byock, Jesse 1992. 'History and the Sagas: the Effect of Nationalism'. In: PÁLSSON, G. (ed.) *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*. London: Hisarlik Press.

Case, Jo 2011. 'Aborigines, Sharks and Australian Accents: On Australian Writing', *Kill Your Darlings,* 6.

Chantler, Ashley 2009. 'Notes Towards the Definition of the Short-short Story'. In: Cox, A. (ed) *The Short Story*. Cambridge Scholars.

Clunies Ross, Margaret 2000. 'Old Icelandic Literature and Society', Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Dal, Sif 2013. *Hypnogogic*, unplublished manuscript.

Hammack, Phillip 2011. 'Culture, Identity, and Story: A Framework for the Study of Lives'. In: HAMMACK, P. L. (ed.) *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Holm, Bill 2000. 'Iceland 1999'. *Eccentric Islands: Travels Real and Imaginary*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

Howitt-Dring, Holly 2013. 'Making Micro Meanings: Reading and Writing Microfiction'. *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, 1, 11.

McAdams, Dan 2011. 'Narrative Identity'. In: Schwartz, S. J., Luyckx, K. & Vignoles, V. L. (eds.) *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. Brighton: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC.

National Flash Fiction Day 2014. Available from: http://nationalflashfictionday.co.uk [Accessed May 18, 2014]

Nelles, William 2012. 'Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short'. *NARRATIVE*, 20, 17.

Peterson, Carole & McCabe, Allyson 2004. 'Echoing our parents: Parental influences on children's narration'. In: Pratt, M.W. & Fiese, B.E. (Eds.), *Family stories and the life course: Across time and generations,* New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Powell, George & Magnússon, Eiríkur 1864. *Icelandic Legends*, London, Richard Bentley.

Pratt, Michael & Fiese, Barbara 2004. *Family Stories and the Life Course: Across Time and Generations*, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Randall, William 1999. 'Narrative Intelligence and the Novelty of Our Lives'. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13, 1.

Seizure Online 2014. Available from: http://seizureonline.com/category/flashers/ [Accessed May 15, 2014]

Sánchez, Sylvia 1999. 'Learning from the Stories of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families and Communities: A Sociohistorical Lens'. *Remedial and Special Education*, 20, 8.

Suárez-Orozco, Carola 2004. 'Formulating Identity in the Globalized World'. In: Suárez-Orozco, M. M. & Qin-Hillard, D. B. (eds.) *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millenium.* University of California Press.

Tansley, Laura 2013. 'Short-short sequences, Series, Sounds and Visions'. *Trespassing Journal*, 12.

Turner, Dana 2013. 'New Narratologies: An Examination of the Interplay between Life, Land, and Story. *College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations.* Paper 146. Available from: http://via.librarydepaul.edu/etd/146 [Accessed: September 2, 2014]

Vignoles, Vivienne, Schwartz, Seth & Luyckx, Koen 2011. 'Introduction: Toward an Integrative View of Identity'. In: Schwartz, S. J., Luyckx, K. & Vignoles, V. L. (eds.) *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research.* Brighton: Springer Science+Business Media, LLC.

Endnote:

1. *Smásaga* literally means, ‘small story’; anything from tens of words to a few thousand. In Icelandic, nouns are conjugated. The word *smásaga* is conjugated thus: Singular nominative: *smásaga*, accusative: *smásögu*, dative: *smásögu*, genitive: *smásögu*, Plural nominative: *smásögur*, accusative: *smásögur*, dative: *smásögum*, genitive: *smásagna*