

Swinburne University of Technology

Diane Murray

The unreliable itinerary: the haunted and the haunting stories of historical biography

Abstract:

Marion Leathem was the owner and editor of the Molong Express newspaper in regional New South Wales from 1879 until her death in 1919. Her story is the subject of an epistolary novel, *Printer's Ink* and an Exegesis, *Unreal truths; the lies in every story*, both due for completion in 2016. Marion was a surgeon's daughter, a mother, a wife, a widow and a strong minded, independent business woman of great principle who stepped into her job to support her family and prove herself to her detractors.

Re-telling her life as a biographical history through the medium of letters, exhumed the bodies of several ghosts, some known to the subject and some initially unknown to the author. These manifestations were powerful enough to derail the story and impact on the immediate family of those whose spirits and memories still linger around the town where Marion wrote her news. This paper argues how the ghosts of our writing subjects, past and present, through the filters of memory, archival research and family history, psychologically and physically impact on those who research and write their lives. This transference shifts the responsibility for the story's re-direction onto the writer and ultimately dictates the narrative to encompass themes and ideologies, initially unknown to everyone else but ultimately satisfying to those who watch and listen for when they raise their shadowy heads.

Biographical note:

Diane Murray an interior architect, writer and poet is currently undertaking her PhD at Swinburne University on the subject of Marion Leathem. Her articles and stories have been published in professional publications, industry magazines and online journals. Colonialism, feminist history and the psychology of writing biographical fiction are the subjects of her exegesis and have generated research into transference, countertransference, post generational memory and fact versus fiction. Previously Deputy Chairman of the New South Wales Writers Centre, she is an executive committee member of HNSA and lives in Sydney.

Keywords:

Biography – transference – counter-transference – history – post-memory –
epistolarity

In line with the theme of this conference, I thought I would tell you a different kind of ghost story. It is a story which came generally unbidden as I tried to delve into the lives of those who have gone before. It is a story which arose during the writing of my PhD artefact and which haunted me for the duration of the project and still manages to disturb my sleep as I finish my exegesis.

It is a story of the constant pull between what is real and what is created when writing fictional biography and how the ghosts of your subjects have the power to disrupt the story you are telling simply by letting you find out too much about them in your research. It is a story about how the many layered effects of the unconscious mind, when trying to write in the voice of another have the power to change the perspective of the story by challenging the internal dialogue of the author and ultimately redirecting the focus of the book.

This is a story about Marion Wrixon Leathem and it is a story about telling her story.

Marion Wrixon Leathem 1841-1919, my maternal great, great grandmother, came to Australia as an infant of six months with her father, Dr William Large the surgeon superintendent on the *Braken Moor*; her mother, Mary-Ann Caroline Wrixon Large and her two elder siblings. They settled first in Melbourne then Tumut and that is where Marion grew up

Marion took over the Proprietresship of the fledgling *Molong Express and Western Districts Advertiser* newspaper in 1879 when her husband, Henry Vale Leathem died from the sudden onset of pneumonia at the age of thirty five. At the time Marion, who was thirty six, had six children under the age of ten years with the youngest being just a few months old. She took on the role of Editor and Proprietress and ran the newspaper successfully, firstly alone and later with the assistance of her four sons, until her death at the age of seventy eight. She retained sole ownership of the newspaper until her death in 1919. It has been stated that she never missed a day at her desk.

From the numerous obituaries written, it is obvious she had the respect of the local residents as well as the extended Australian newspaper communities for her strong principles, reputable work ethic, Christian beliefs and stoic good nature. Her various eulogies in her own newspaper, assorted trade journals and newspapers written by male colleagues, describe a woman, almost feared by the writers and are mostly composed in terms of part reverence and part awe, with an eye to the hereafter and a possible future meeting on some more spiritual plane with their subject.

Marion Leathem has been an iconic figure in my family chronicle and I felt her life and achievements would be overlooked if left to the unreliability of family oral memoir. I feared she would be forgotten for all the things which made her unique in an era where women rarely worked outside the family home. Her independence, courage and business achievements might now be disregarded by a generation who accept feminist equality as the normal state. But Marion achieved what she achieved in a time when things were not so easy for a woman alone in this fledgling colony. I felt it was time to record her place in this nation's archives.

I chose to write Marion's life as an epistolary novel, allowing her fictional letters to be an operative device to bring readers into a more personal connection with the indomitable woman my research had shown her to be. I also wanted to personalise this woman who was the subject of so much family awe by hearing her real and personal words, outside of those written as newspaper editorial.

I pondered the idea of writing her diary instead, but found letters to be a more challenging medium and more revealing. It is too easy in a diary to reveal the true longings of the heart for the diary is written for the writer alone – one expects it to be full of the writer's inner conflict and thoughts. In composing letters, the writer is forced to be more devious. Emotions and subterfuge are unconsciously conveyed by the passage of the words and the choice of the intended recipient has a direct bearing on what tone the letter will take. Letters are always written in the present, and the format dictates that the reader will also read them in the present, no matter how long ago they were actually written. Letters are always corporeal – they are living epistles.

To write Marion's letters meant I had to become my character – immerse myself in Marion and think as she would have thought, write as she would have written and act as should have acted. I hung her portrait over my desk, where I could see her whenever I looked up, hoping for some type of psychic transference from this daunting matriarch – little understanding the subliminal power of your subject staring at the back of your head constantly while you write their biography.

Finding Marion's voice had me writing her letters, by candlelight, very early in the morning or late at night, with quill and ink, as I struggled to reconstruct the woman emanating from my pen. The hallowed circle of light around the candle created a space in the darkness which allowed me to feel the presence of Marion, channelling her words onto the page. More than once, as I wrote something particularly personal or speculative during the construction of her character, I would have a sense of her disapproval and would look around furtively expecting to see an apparition. The act of writing her letters had brought her back to life, for as I wrote her life, I was writing about what was happening in the 'now'. No matter how long it had been since Marion held a pen herself, to me she was very much alive.

Although my letters were fiction, they were based on the subjective truth of historical biography. My research was thorough and even if all the events I was writing had not actually happened, they may as well have happened, for they were part of Marion's life. The letters had the ring of truth because they contained so much of what was fact, written through the hand of an author who was living in Marion's life. Marguerite Macrobert said,

the relationship between characters and their creators is symbiotic. An author's life influences his characters and a character's development influences the author. We may write about things we have never experienced directly, but as we write them, we experience in sensory and emotional detail, and they become real and merge with our real memories (Macrobert 2012).

In re-storying Marion, I had rebirthed her and though the letters were from a woman dead for nearly one hundred years, they were also the living missives of her most

intimate connections to her descendants. These letters anchored Marion to the present but they also anchored me to Marion's past.

In reviewing Monica Ali's book, *Brick Lane* (Ali 2003), Rachel Bower noted that critics and readers 'tend to broadly accept the assumptions that have historically accompanied the reception of epistolary narratives, viewing the letter as a transparent window onto the soul of the letter writer' (Zimblet et al. 2014). The character is portrayed through the perceived filters of voice, action, motive and intuition by the reader and the unknown backstory becomes the silent narrative which drives the reader's interest. This silent narrative lets the reader know what he is not intended to know, much in the same way that authentic letters reveal much more of the writer than what is consciously committed to the page.

The impact of a letter read or received after the death of the writer has particular significance to the reader. It is hauntingly, a letter from the grave – it is the dead speaking. This phenomenon adds an emotional and poignant quality to an already venerated document which quickly becomes an artefact. This is the quality I wished to emulate for Marion.

I called my book *Printer's Ink*, because the story of Marion and her newspaper was so indelibly etched into our family annals. Now that copies of *The Molong Express and Western Districts Advertiser* are forever stored in the archives of the State Library and ANU through Trove, their printed words are also corporeal. They have a body, a soul and a heritage. They have outlived their author – but Marion does not live on because of her written words in a newspaper.

My very extensive research into her life revealed that there were more stories to Marion's life than simply her own. Her parents, her uncles and cousin, her children and their children, all had stories which interwove with Marion's and often retold the many events, commonly held as fact in our family. However, my further research into these side stories challenged the accepted family truths and as I wrote the letters of *Printer's Ink* I found myself overtaken by a variety of dualities that disrupted the family legacy. As truths merged with fiction and research destroyed truths, I looked for credibility in what was available but found I was experiencing Marion's life as a parallel to my own. My problems became Marion's as we travelled on this dual pathway one hundred and fifty years apart. I was acutely aware of our similarities, our humanness and our shared predicaments as life mirrored life.

As the absent subject of the living Marion Leathem asserted herself, ghost-like into my writing, the research accelerated, almost divulging itself, as if to accommodate the growing presence of the subject by revealing facts and symbologies in every facet of my investigation.

I started to question the way I had chosen to write about her life and the wisdom of unearthing long forgotten truths which might impact on those still living, who had no say in their evolved history.

One family member in particular, Marion's eldest granddaughter, Fanny, touched a deep place within my mind. When I found Fanny's surviving daughters, I was further confronted by the story I had chosen to write. I encountered destructive bouts of

transference and countertransference between myself and Marion as I tried to make sense of the research already undertaken and write the story I had intended to write. I almost felt that Marion had inhabited my mind and only her opinions were manifesting as the written word on the page. She seemed to have control of what was being written and as I came to have more empathy with her granddaughter, I became resentful and confronted by Marion's words and control of the novel.

Slowly, Marion became the villain of the piece which was not helpful when it was after all her biography, whilst her wronged granddaughter, Fanny, the original 'nasty piece of work' gathered momentum as the heroine and garnered all my sympathy. The ghosts were duelling with the ghosts using my pen. To dispute Marion's written word was confronting, even though I had written her original letters which were now in question. My research was contradicting the truths of those letters, as I had written them, but to have Marion reveal the interpreted truth in her writing, would expose quite a few skeletons who through generational hard work and intentional concealment, had remained tightly ensconced in the family closet for many years.

I resented what I had already written and worried about what I should or shouldn't say in the rest of the novel. I was confronted by the reverence in which Marion was held and intimidated by what I was about to write, which might detract from her credibility. The dead were making the rules and the ghosts were haunting the present. Transference was shifting the responsibility for the story's re-direction back onto the writer and the narrative was ultimately being used to vilify those, who though dead, suddenly had acquired a very loud voice.

Dominick LaCapra states that transference creates a situation which is 'invested with affect and meaning that seem uncalled for and' seems 'to be coming from somewhere else' (La Capra 2014). In contrast, countertransference was described by Freud as being 'a result of the patient's influence on (the physician's) unconscious feelings'. Freud (1853) He noted that as an analyst is also a human, he can easily let his emotions into the client. It seemed that Marion was walking in my shoes when I was meant to be walking in hers and neither her shoes nor mine were big enough for both pairs of feet.

I had a sense of conducting my own interpersonal psychotherapy session using Marion's writing as a conduit as to why my feelings towards her were so negative. Observing the writer's, 'id, ego and superego' (Freud 1922), I was projecting onto Marion all the complications of dealing with the character I had created, as various aspects of both psyches developed at different stages of the writing. 'The more acute the experience, the less articulate its expressions' (Burkman 1971) and the relationship dynamics expounded into a different dynamic.

These transferences between them almost derailed *Printer's Ink* as I struggled to right the generational wrongs perpetrated on Fanny, through the dual prisms of these unbidden processes and their consequences. The necessary parallel was to retain the original family history and placate those family members still alive, who had some living knowledge of these two key characters while the ghosts were freed to tell the shadowy stories of generations past and souls lost to time in the guise of fiction.

The epistolary form used in *Printer's Ink* to create an intimacy with the character brought the writer of the letters into a parallel space with the reader of the letters, though over a century effectively stood between them. The dead stood by the living and the dead stood by the dead.

By allowing the reader to be an observer in the present of her most private correspondence, the many facets of Marion Leathem were revealed and laid open to judgement. Fanny's two surviving daughters however, aged eighty eight and ninety, were much alive and their esteemed reverence for their mother dictated how I would write about her. Their accounts, although only personal historiography influenced by their love for their mother, determined the final direction of my narrative which allowed both Marion and Fanny to shine in their own particular eras.

What I effectively had were two separate stories about two very amazing women. After considerable soul searching, I decided that Marion's story would be told as originally intended as the artefact for the PhD, although with considerable modification and distinction from the intended narrative. Fanny's story would be undertaken as a follow on project after the PhD and hopefully would not be disrupted by the negative and destructive influences of Marion's.

Though writing fact upon fact upon event can portray a sense of actuality, it may not necessarily give a true insight into the internal make up of a character. When gathering information, the writer, simply because she is delving into so many different forms of archival and historical data bases for information, begins to form an intuitive impression of the subject which cannot always be backed up with documented fact. This intuition is determined more from the sequencing of the events in the life of the character, the historical incidents which occur around the character and the relationships the character has with others.

All of these events are then filtered through the writers mind and assessed in relation to their own experiences and life story. The inner workings of the character become a combination of what is known and what is imagined and the spirit which emerges from this meld, embodies the ghosts of those whose stories we choose to tell.

List of works cited

- Ali, Monica 2003 *Brick Lane*, London: Doubleday
- Burkman, Katherine.H 1971 '*The Dramatic Role of Harold Pinter; Its Basis in Ritual*', Ohio: Ohio State university Press, 6
- Derrida, Jacques 2012 *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Hoboken: Taylor and Francis
- Freud, Sigmund 1853 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: Hogarth Press
- Freud, Sigmund 1922 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, London: C.J.M.T. Hubback
- Labudova, Katarina 2013 '*Presences and Absences*', *Transdisciplinary Essays*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing
- La Capra, Dominick 2014 *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: JHU Press, Baltimore, xvi

Macrobert, Marguerite 2012 'Exploring an acting method to contain the potential madness of the creative writing process: mental health and writing with emotion', *The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 9:3, 349-360

Molong Express and Western Districts Advertiser, 1887-1954

Patterson, Katherine B 1995 *A Communicative Approach to the Epistolary Form in Letters of Victorian Women Writers*, Toronto: University of Toronto

Wimble, Fred. T 1919 *Wimbles Reminder* 51, 12

Zimble Jarad, Etherington Ben, Bower, Rachel 2014 'Crafts of world literature: field, material & translations', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49:3, 318