Imagination's afterlife: influences on and transformations of literary creative process within a Creative Practice PhD

Masson, S. (2018). Imagination's afterlife: influences on and transformations of literary creative process within a Creative Practice PhD. *New Writing, 15*(1), 31-37.

DOI of the final copy of this article: 10.1080/14790726.2017.1334803

Imagination's afterlife: influences on and transformations of literary creative process within a Creative Practice PHD

Abstract:

Professional authors of imaginative literature, whether fiction or non-fiction, follow creative processes that have been built from a mix of experience and instinct. These are specific and individual to each author, but have been established by them over time, and frequently in an informal, non-analytical, but nevertheless successful way. What happens when a professional author, used to such a process, undertakes the writing of a creative work within the framework of a PHD? What influences come to bear on the creative work from the analytical, academic part of the PHD project? Does creative process change? If so, how? And what impact might it be expected to have on the final work, and the author's continuing creative practice, even beyond the period of study?

Drawing on interviews with writers who are undertaking or have recently completed a creative writing PHD, and with creative writing academics, the author of this paper, an established novelist and PHD student, examines the synergies between imagination and analysis within a higher degree research project, and how this affects the creative process itself.

……

Introduction

In *Fourteen Reasons to Mistrust a PHD,* the online version of a chapter from a book entitled *Artists with PHDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*, James Elkins, a prominent American scholar in art history and art criticism, canvassed the objections that can be raised to the idea of working artists undertaking PHDs. Though his analysis is focussed on visual artists, it makes interesting and relevant reading for writers too. One of the very early 'reasons to mistrust a PHD' which he examines is 'It is not clear what kinds of art, if any, are potentially improved by serious research'. He goes on to say that

> Personally, I would like to enlist most of the world's art practices as examples of kinds of work that would not be suited for PhD-level research…there have been many times and places in art history in which the art practices depended on not being systematic, on not involving research, on not being clear. Some kinds of art practice can benefit from the kinds of discipline involved in producing research proposals and working systematically: many others might not….The question whether those skills—the ability to form a research program, to gather information thoroughly and systematically, to analyze it clearly—are appropriate to nameable art practices, or if they are, in theory, applicable to any art practices.

Later, he also examines another aspect, discussing whether undertaking a PHD might make an artist too self-reflective, to the detriment of the creative part of the PHD project, the artistic work itself. As he puts it, 'many artists have made compelling work even though they had no idea of the critical matrix to which their work belongs, and despite the fact that they were only minimally reflective about their own practice.'

These discussions go right to the heart of creative process, and the question of whether undertaking a PHD changes it or not. It's a question that many writers, as much as visual artists, might ask themselves, with the anxiety being that to examine process too closely might end in freezing it or making it too self-conscious, or 'self-reflective'. It's certainly something that established writers in particular, who have developed their own creative process over time, may find challenging. And it throws up some interesting issues. What happens when a professional, established author, used to working within their own process, undertakes the writing of a creative work within the framework of a PHD? What influences come to bear on the creative work from the analytical, academic part of the PHD project? Does creative process change? If so, how? And what impact might it be expected to have on the final work, and the author's continuing creative practice, even beyond the period of study?

Background

This paper has grown out of one of my earlier publications, *Breaking the pattern: established writers undertaking creative writing doctorates in Australia*, published in the journal TEXT in October 2016. Based on interviews with four prominent Australian creative writing academics and six established Australian writers undertaking PHDS, it examined the broader view of the PHD experience for established writers in Australia, from motivations to experiences to outcomes. This included briefly touching on the question of whether writers' creative process had been affected by the PHD.

This paper expands on that question, by drawing on extensive new interviews with four other writers not surveyed in the earlier paper. They are also established Australian writers who have either recently completed or still undertaking their PHDs (or doctorates) in creative writing. These new interviews are all with fiction writers, three of whom, Ursula Dubosarsky, Sherryl Clark and Lynnette Lounsbury, specialise in children's/young adult literature, with the fourth being adult speculative fiction author Jack Dann. Additional introductory comments have also been sought from Dr Yvonne Griggs and Dr Jeremy Fisher, who are both currently academics at the University of New England, as well as practising writers. (1)

As a prelude, it is worth quoting some comments made by the writers interviewed in the earlier paper, *Breaking the pattern*. Of the effect on his creative process, Stephen Dedman wrote that 'I found the prospect of writing a novel that would meet with the university's approval somewhat inhibiting, and second-guessed myself a lot, with the result that I'm less than happy with the novel,' while Wendy James observed that her writing process didn't really change at all but being able to focus exclusively on the writing meant she finished a first draft of her novel much faster than usual. Kate Forsyth also felt her normal creative process hadn't changed during the PHD, with her novel developing as normal, whilst in contrast fellow fiction writer Nick Earls observed that his process had changed, in a positive way: 'After twenty books, it's given me permission to do something different, think in a different way and work outside the system. It has given me a chance to think deeply about the novella form and commit to it.' Playwright Donna Abela was equally positive, commenting that the experience had made her a 'more courageous artist' and that she felt much more assured of her practice, while Tony Davis reported that his process changed in ways he found difficult : 'I went through periods of over-thinking structure, perspective, etcetera, and I lost some spontaneity and verve from my writing.' (2)

The view from the academy

In *Breaking the pattern*, the creative writing academics interviewed stressed the importance of established writers not viewing the creation of work within the PHD as 'business as usual' but as an opportunity to extend themselves both in a research/critical and a creative sense. The academics interviewed for this paper agreed with this view, but expanded on the benefits for writers of that process, with Yvonne Griggs remarking that the Creative Practice PHD students she's worked with as a supervisor have embraced the opportunity:

> Research has provided fertile lines of enquiry that have enriched the story world or at least given pause for further thought. Having the time to explore the ideas of others, and to contemplate the more theoretical side of the equation has, in my experience of working with students, always been an added bonus. As creative writers we take on board some ideas while rejecting others; the same is true of our reception of academic ideas: some we embrace, others we challenge but in grappling with new ideas we consolidate our own writing position from an informed vantage point. Hopefully, students will leave their postgraduate studies having formed a research habit that they see as a valuable, integral part of the writing process.

Dr Griggs also stressed the importance of writer-students learning to master a new way of working, and writing, during their PHD, both for practical reasons and for extending their creative practice:

> I think it's important to encourage students to forge an academic profile alongside the existing author profile during their postgraduate studies. The research then becomes more than an exercise essential to the PhD process: it becomes something that has real currency – a potentially enduring currency- beyond the parameters of the PhD.

Meanwhile, Jeremy Fisher noted that:

> students undertaking creative practice higher research degrees do tend to alter their approach to writing, at least those who succeed do so. Working within the constraints of an academic discipline means that students must master the genre of academic writing to succeed. Students who fail to comprehend the importance of this fail to appreciate the importance of the exegetical component in a creative practice higher research degree. Students who recognise the need to master another genre, to put it in writing terms, do well because they have learned how to speak within their academic discipline and explain their creativity in terms that other disciplines can understand.

Creative process before the PHD: the writers' views

Turning to the interviews with established writers, there was a diversity of opinion and experience. This extended to a discussion of how creative process worked for them before the PHD study was undertaken. Sherryl Clark described a meticulous way of working:

> Over the years of writing, I've developed my own method of plotting, which is a mix of diagrams and either the three-act or hero's journey structure. I have a story grid of my own where I fill in boxes and work out where things go.

Ursula Dubosarsky's approach was radically different: 'My normal way of working tends to be fairly un-self-conscious, perhaps almost on principle… and I never offer my work up to anyone else before it's finished. '

Lynnette Lounsbury observed that

> My usual creative process is quite fractured. I am a writer working around young children and a full time job and so while I think about writing a lot, planning thoughts and conversation for when I have time, my actual writing time is almost frenetic – I write fast and rarely edit until a manuscript is complete. I throw down words in the small spaces I can find.

Undertaking the PHD made all the writers more aware of creative process but not in a uniformly positive way. Ursula Dubosarsky, whose PHD had been completed a few years previously, expressed discomfort with the requirement at her university to:

> present some progress in a formal setting of a seminar at regular intervals. I would have to introduce whatever I read from the novel with some cogent thoughts. I found it very disconcerting and I suppose I hoped nobody would ask me any questions about where it was going because I wouldn't have been able to answer.

Interestingly, Sherryl Clark, who is still working towards her PHD, reported on a certain loosening of the more structured nature of her own creative process due to the nature of her studies: 'A lot of what I'm studying is about why fairy tales resonate, why they have endured, why we respond to them. I've decided that it's the deeper themes, that our unconscious plays a big part. '

Jack Dann, who had just completed his PHD at the time of the interview, wrote about how a practical part of the PHD helped him to look at his own process differently: 'A generous scholarship allowed me to write more experimentally, push against the edges, than if I were writing a novel ordinarily. No matter the result in terms of publication and reception, I took advantage of the chance to be paid to pull out all the stops.'

And Lynnette Lounsbury, who is still working on her PHD, confirmed that undertaking her studies made her think differently about the writing of the novel: 'It meant that my thoughts(for the novel) were subject to my research, because I am writing an exegesis concurrent to the novel, and justifying a process makes it important to actually have an identifiable one!'

Changing creative process

In a recent correspondence with the author of this paper, James Elkins, whose research on artists with PHDs was quoted in the introduction, observed that all the visual artists he knew who had undertaken a PHD had changed their creative process as a result, but that this was not a positive result in general: 'There is a recognizable PhD style (bookish, theory-laden, sometimes weak on the visuals), which in general gets a poor or mixed reception in the art world.' (3)

Would this be the same for the writers? All the people interviewed for this paper certainly reported experiencing changes in creative process during the PHD. However, interestingly, these frequently looped back into earlier ways of working. Sherryl Clark reported on drawing on her research to 'develop an experimental process for my fairy tales. It uses free writing, based on writing immediately as soon as an idea for a fairy tale strikes me!' But this new way of creation did not work on a larger scale for her: 'I also tried using this method for the novel, but it started to unravel around

15,000 words because the plot got away on me. At that point I went back to the diagramming and rewrote the first part before I could go on.'

Both in contrast and echo, Ursula Dubosarsky's attempt to change her creative process to fit PHD expectations brought her right back to her original way of working:

> In my anxiety to seem like a proper person I even for the first time attempted a "plan" with chapters and arcs and all that sort of thing that you read and hear about, which looked all very impressive but as soon as I started actually writing the book the plan just disappeared into the ether as my mind took off on its own path.

To her relief, that was not seen as a problem: 'My supervisor did not comment on any drafts of the novel that I submitted but just let me do what I felt best.'

In contrast, Jack Dann commented in detail on how the two strands of his project, the creative and the academic, meshed together to create a hybrid creative process which redefined both parts of the project:

> My thesis was an examination of the nature of alternate history, and the novel component was an attempt to push the alternate history envelope, so to speak. What I discovered, as I examined other writers' processes and compared them to my own and as I made an intensive investigation into the very nature of this form of historical extrapolation, was that the novel component would not fit comfortably into pre-existing description models of the subgenre. This drew me constantly back to my thesis novel, which I would categorize as alternate history, or to use a more precise term, counterfactual fiction, but which could be also described--using the extant critical models--as historical fantasy. I have created what I believe is a more comprehensive model and definitional lexicon, if that's the right term, so that I could determine whether I had indeed written a novel that was counterfactual fiction rather than fantasy; and that process, almost by definition, forced me to examine--and try to understand--my creative processes retrospectively.

For Lynnette Lounsbury, the research she engaged in for the PHD changed a very particular aspect of her creative process:

> I repurpose history for my work. Usually I do this with unfettered frivolity – I don't take too much care with attempting any sort of empirical evidentiary truth. I write fiction informed by history. For my PHD, only part of my process changed: I still write in whatever time I can find, and I still plan my work mentally before writing it, so that I can use these small moments more efficiently. But my use of history has changed. Whereas *Afterworld* and *We ate the Road Like Vultures* used history in highly imaginative ways that bent any sense of the 'realness' of it, Endeavour is analogous and I needed to be sure I was capturing a sense of Australia history the way it has been recorded and presented to us. As such I did lot of research, both into the primary and secondary sources of Australian history. I tried to find an immersive and emotional sense of the Indigenous culture of Australia pre-colonisation apart from its colonial representations and I tried to get a sense of how Australians like to filter and mythologise their own colonial history. Only after that, did I begin to write my novel. This provided a secondary framework to imagination, a much less fluid one.

Enduring effects on creative process

When creative process changes during a PHD, does this have an enduring effect on writers' individual arts practice? Both Jack Dann and Ursula Dubosarsky had completed their PHDs and were able to reflect on whether their creative process had been permanently altered by it. While Ursula Dubosarsky observed that she had 'reverted to type', with her creative process not changed in any substantial way, Jack Dann reported that doing the PHD had influenced 'the construction process, the day to day unconscious reworking and refocusing of the story's architecture. Yet I think most of this is working at an unconscious level--and, yes, I do see the irony of left-brain critical analysis being unconscious!'

For Sherryl Clark, still within her PHD program, the question of whether her creative process would permanently change was still in contention: 'I think I am at the stage of combining free writing and structure at that deeper level, and trying to develop it further - but the next stage of how this goes is still in the future. I think it will continue to evolve but only time will tell.'

However Lynnette Lounsbury, also still within her period of study, could already see an enduring effect:

> My creative process has indeed been changed by the framework of the PHD, but I don't see it as something negative. I think it has made me more thoughtful about my use of historical evidence in fiction, more thoughtful about the bigger picture of plot (often I allow plot to form as I write and in the case of my PHD I planned out my story in detail before drafting), and more careful with my representations of the people and events of the past.

In an interesting sidelight Yvonne Griggs reflected on her own experience as a PHD student and how it changed her writing and career choices:

> My project entailed a creative component (writing of a feature length screenplay adaptation of Shakespeare's King Lear--King Lear as dystopian Sci-Fi) which was informed throughout by academic research into adaptation theory, existing screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in general and of King Lear in particular. I found myself increasingly captivated by the research side of things: it informed my creative writing in positive ways, and has since taken me down a different career path as a full time academic. So for me, it was a pleasurable and energising part of my PhD experience that has indeed endured beyond the parameters of the PhD.

Finally, to look briefly at my personal experience, the question of potential change to the way I write was a question I considered before starting my own PHD, as an established writer with a highly-developed but intuitive creative process. It has been illuminating, as I advance through the work, to see not only how an early concern that academic expectations might lead me to 'over-think', thereby losing spontaneity, has not eventuated, but instead the intellectual aspect has complemented the imaginative aspect in a number of ways. Both encouraged and challenged by my studies to explore rigorously as well as creatively, I have found that the reading and viewing of other creative works and associated scholarly material for the exegesis, heightens the sense of curiosity which has always been an integral part of my creative process. Being aware of what other people have done, and thinking about it, has created a context around my creative process which is highly stimulating and which, though conscious, has unexpectedly appeared to sharpen the intuitive aspect

of the actual novel-writing process. Finally, it has also created a sense of being part of a literary movement, a grouping of the imagination, which has enriched my understanding of the genre in which I am writing.

Conclusion

For established writers creating new imaginative work within a PHD, there is usually an effect on creative process. How deep or far the change goes, and whether it is resisted or embraced, is as diverse and individual as writers themselves. The principal question raised by James Elkins—whether such study and research benefit individual arts practice—seems to be generally answered in the affirmative for writers, at least within this small sample, but it cannot be said to be the case for every individual writer who has undertaken a PHD. It is also clear from the interviews that the view of changing creative process is influenced not only by writers' personal motivations, attitudes and expectations, but also by individual experiences of the PHD culture within individual universities. An understanding within the academy of how established writers work and how best they might be encouraged and supported in extending themselves beyond their habitual creative process is thus crucial to the success of the PHD experience.

Notes

(1) All interviews for this paper were conducted by email, in October and December 2016 and January 2017. All the interviewees have given their permission to be quoted in full.
(2) All quotes used in this section are from *Breaking the pattern: established writers undertaking creative writing doctorates in Australia*.
(3) Quote by James Elkins, in email correspondence with Sophie Masson, November 2016. Permission granted for full reproduction.

Works Cited

Elkins, James, *14 Reasons to Mistrust a PHD*, online working version of chapter from *Artists with PHDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art,* edited by James Elkins. http://www.jameselkins.com/yy/4-fourteen-reasons-to-mistrust-the-phd/ Accessed October 12 2016.

Masson, Sophie, *Breaking the pattern: established writers undertaking creative writing doctorates in Australia*, TEXT, Vol 20 no 2, http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct16/masson.htm