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Thesis: Moving Forward

Exegesis: Turning Fact into Fiction

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Primary supervisor: James George

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Centre for Creative Writing,
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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Candidate's signature

Debra Susan Haworth

Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks go to the many participants I interviewed for the factual information that forms the basis of this novel. They have expressed a preference to remain unnamed but their contributions were invaluable.

I am forever grateful to James George for his incredible generosity in sharing his vast knowledge and seemingly unlimited skill to help me develop my submission. His support and encouragement is inestimable.

This thesis was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee in 11/07.16 AUTEK Reference number 16/185

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Abstract

The thesis, a novel titled *Moving Forward*, came about in response to my desire to examine the emotional experiences that seemed common among caregivers looking after their loved ones over protracted time frames. The novel tracks the lives of the protagonist Sean Barker and his disabled wife Caro, as they come in to terms with the catastrophic fallout resulting from her traumatic brain injury sustained in a helicopter crash. The novel attempts to investigate their emotional journey as they move through various stages of recovery.

The exegesis, titled *Turning Fact into Fiction*, explores two main areas of research. Firstly, the documented recovery stages of a traumatic brain injury (TBI) patient, and the documented recovery stages of a carer of a TBI patient. And secondly, the processes I undertook to transform factual material into a fictional novel. The exegesis considers the challenges faced in adapting and dramatising source material in an authentic manner in order to create an output that holds the attention of a fiction reader.

In the research phase, I interviewed more than twenty family members, friends and support professionals associated with the factual events. That output was then transcribed into a factual chronological record of the lives of the real participants. The next task was to adapt that source material into an authentic fictional rendering of events in a manner that reflected universal emotional truth in the characters.

Throughout the project I trod a fine line between balancing the emotional journeys of my fictional characters, and being true and respectful to the experiences of the interview participants. I believe I have treated all my people, both real and imagined, with dignity.

Turning Fact into Fiction

(An Exegesis)

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Introduction

It was the Saturday before Christmas. I sat on a low wall that edged a manicured summer garden watching revellers dance to an enthusiastic band. The man beside me laughed as somebody toppled into the swimming pool. I asked if he'd join them for a swim. It was so hot.

"I need to return to Napier soon," he said.

It was a simple statement but in it I heard that something else. Obligation, regret, guilt; emotions I easily recognised.

"What takes you there?" I asked, and a brief précis of the life he shared with his disabled wife unfolded.

I awoke in the early hours of the following morning still tussling with our conversation, and in those moments, the idea germinated to write a book about this couple's journey through adversity. It took several weeks to gain his permission to tell their story. He was mindful of the possible consequences of laying it out, and humble about his role as an extraordinary caregiver.

Their journey reflected seemingly universal emotional truths of the human experience. We discussed none of this that sunny afternoon, but having looked after my father through Alzheimer's for ten years, and having cared for my dearest friend through terminal cancer, I recognised the similarity. Those emotional responses in him seemed common among primary caregivers trying to manage adversity over extended time frames; be it caring for the intellectually or physically disabled, the ill, or the old. I had long sought a conduit to explore these issues and perhaps provoke discussion through literature. This story provided that outlet.

Initially I envisaged a work of creative nonfiction to best portray their experience, partly because I enjoyed reading this genre the most, but more so because I doubted I had the imagination or talent to write a work of fiction. Additionally, I surmised creative nonfiction drew on a more journalistic methodology in terms of research and writing, with which I was familiar, and the use of exposition and omniscient narration, my preferred writing style, seemed more accepted within that genre.

Then very early into the project, I was asked to write the story as fiction. The chronological rendering of the events of their lives was only part of the undertaking. As my research and interviewing progressed, I understood more clearly the desire, and indeed the necessity for privacy and protection. The husband's generosity in sharing the

most intimate details of their lives, as best as this quiet man was capable of, needed to be respected. Consequently, I have attempted to expand on the heart of their story and develop it into a fictional novel based on factual information.

Synopsis

We will never know if Caro realised the pilot had made a mistake and knew they were going to crash, or whether she even noticed the power lines that flicked the helicopter like a spinning top before it hurtled it to the ground. We do know that her brain was smashed against her skull so viciously she will never again speak a full sentence, walk unassisted, or even blow her own nose.

Caro and Sean have been together for thirty-four years, and married for most of them. For twenty-four of these years Caro has been a tetraplegic as a result of the traumatic brain injury (TBI) she sustained in that helicopter accident. Their story is one of adversity, and more specifically how they cope with that adversity and manage the resulting obstacles. This novel explores their emotional survival, drawing on themes of loyalty, choice, obligation, regret and guilt.

Following the accident, Caro undergoes two years of intensive rehabilitation in various hospital institutions, with Sean by her bedside. For much of that time he is convinced she will make a full recovery even though the medical advice contradicts that. He bases his decisions regarding her care and treatment on that optimism, despite Caro's own family's suggestion that any intervention would go against her wishes had she been able to express them.

When Sean finally acknowledges her rehabilitation will be a protracted experience, and recognises that remaining in hospital is intolerable to both of them, he builds a house in Rotorua, closer to his work, and she continues her recovery programs from home. For nine years they endure a slow and confined life that eventually stagnates to the point that Sean realises another release of sorts is required. Instead of a house, this time he builds a boat, hoping they will break free and develop a lifestyle that is more interesting and adventurous than the one into which they have sunk. That fantasy is far removed from their reality and after just a few years, he ditches the boat and invests in a business in Napier, hoping to provide a sustainable future for them that keeps him sane and provides financially for Caro.

He struggles on for a further four years in Napier, steadily descending into a depressed funk until he decides he needs to find a solution that facilitates an escape from the situation in which he's trapped, but in a manner that minimises any suffering for Caro. In the cathartic climax, Sean finally understands there are no palatable alternatives available to them beyond temporary respite, and he settles on an outcome that protects Caro from a traumatic tearing asunder, but ensures his own emotional survival.

Source Material – The Real People

“Whenever you draw the line between fiction and nonfiction, you need to remember the basic rules of good citizenship: don't write to do harm to innocent victims ... think how your story will affect your reader. Beyond the creation of a seamless, engaging narrative, you're trying to touch and affect someone's life.” (Gutkind, 2012 p. 42).

My over-riding desire in creating this work was to stay as close to the factual story as possible. I was given unlimited access to the couple's private letters, medical diaries and photograph albums. However, I drew most on the hours and hours of interviews I conducted with the husband, family members, friends and supporting professionals who had direct experience and knowledge of the their journey.

Although my final output is presented as a work of fiction, I was cognisant throughout that the couple's immediate circle of friends and family are fully aware this story is inspired by the events in their lives. Knowing this has been enough for me to write in a manner that protects their dignity, and the rigorous ethics application I submitted served me well in providing additional clarity.

Once the husband agreed to me writing their story, he made a conscious decision to share their whole truth, as he perceived it. In so doing, it was the first time he had spoken to anyone in any depth about the fraught emotional journey he has endured, and it was also the first time he has admitted his feelings of grief, frustration, and hopelessness. With his disclosure came the burden of knowing that those most interested in reading this novel would be his closest family and friends, all of whom had never had access to the full story or information I was about to disclose. The revelations I chose to include, although fictionalised, still reflected the suffering of a known individual and the research results were more pertinent to the final output than perhaps

the generalised use a writer or researcher might make of source material to create emotional authenticity in a novel.

Before I met the accident victim, a sense of her character, past and present, percolated from the collation of the many different viewpoints of her life I had heard. Several shared anecdotes and overlapping incidents indicated to me that she might be much more cognitively aware than many people realised from their limited individual interactions with her. When I eventually ‘talked’ to her, even though it was extremely difficult to garner meaningful content from our interactions, she was as engaging and alert as I had suspected she might be.

After spending a few days with her, several months into the project, I decided to adjust the manuscript to give a voice to the female protagonist in the novel. But in adding this perspective, there was a risk I might upset her or introduce context to her that she may not have previously considered or experienced. It is impossible to know what she retains in terms of the thoughts she has expressed, and the strong emotions she has felt. To me, she seemed relatively cognitive and advanced in her thinking with a delightfully quirky sense of humour, but her husband says her responses are deceptive and change from day to day. Her long-term memory appears to have recovered but her short-term memory remains unreliable.

I interviewed many others connected to the couples’ journey and these enquiries dug into intensely painful and personal experiences – the fallout from some of which is still ongoing. Some family members I spoke to seemed to carry an element of guilt, so in the novel I try to treat all the characters with empathy, and leave the readers scope to draw their own conclusions about some of their decisions or behaviour.

The process of recording and transcribing personal interviews for use in the creation of authentic fictional scenes prompted an AUT University requirement for ethics approval. This was ultimately useful because it helped me frame my own boundaries around what information I included in the novel, and also the manner in which I collected that information. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) argue:

“All interviews are interpretively active, implicating meaning making practices on the part of both interviewers and respondents” (p. 4).

Active interviews are “*social productions*” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4), whereby the respondent is the narrator and the interviewer is a participant in the story they construct together. The interviewing process can therefore be problematic in extracting the unadulterated truth. With this in mind, I was careful not to formulate questions that fell into the trap of confirmation bias, or were asked in a manner that might prompt a response that fitted my preconceived notions for the narrative of the novel. For the same reasons, it was necessary to formulate open-ended questions that might garner fresh perspective.

Much of the family and friends’ anecdotal information had little validity in terms of moving the plot forward, but in excluding moments of significance to them, I was mindful that participants might have felt unheard or misunderstood. The real life events unfortunately weren’t designed to facilitate dramatic story structure. But, in cherry picking incidents to create a relevant narrative, I was careful not to distort too far or wholly misrepresent their experience in my adapting and compressing to fit the dramatic development of the story – although the mere process of fictionalising the story is in fact a distortion. Hemley (1994) says:

“The fact is, all writing – whether a letter, a memoir or a novel – requires some artifice. And the act of writing down memories changes them. They become more real. The line blurs between actual memory and reconstructed written memory so the writer is less able to know for sure what really happened.” (p. 37).

I was concerned that participants might feel troubled when their views were adapted, transformed or compressed in the fictionalised scenes. I therefore went to great lengths to remind them repeatedly that their interview content would be reshaped and condensed. I also required all participants to read and acknowledge an information sheet and sign a consent form.

Depending on whom I interviewed around certain events, I discovered some interviewees were willing and capable of subverting information to suit their own version of events, either as a response to what they perceived I wanted to hear, or in order to make their own role seem more compelling or acceptable.

Some of the participants had behaved towards the couple in ways I found hard to understand, either through neglect, selfishness, or a lack of empathy. However, being mindful of the extreme challenges presented to them by the events they neither

anticipated nor invited, I have only ever hinted at those attitudes through character development, and as the author I've tried to understand but never judge. As Rainer (1979) says:

“If you tell the whole truth, the complete picture, if you include all sides of a person, the dark and the light, then it is possible to tell even ugly truths about someone without character assassinations – if your motive is not to condemn but to understand.” (p. 159).

Some of the candid conversations interviewees shared with me required sensitive handling during the actual interview process, and also in the writing of the resulting scenes derived from the information disclosed. I included some of that material in the manuscript with restraint – although the opportunity to expand on the flaws in the human condition might have enhanced the plot line.

At all times during the creation of this work, foremost in my mind was the defenceless position in which the wife is situated. She was excited about the idea of the book: however, how much could she really comprehend, and how naïve were her expectations? This remains unknown. Her husband was protective of her but also extremely generous in allowing a realistic portrayal of her that sometimes paints her in a negative light.

How to include that important content that determined several themes in the novel was an issue I struggled with throughout the process of fictionalising the story. What truth should be included, and what should be omitted? I was aware that that my decisions might have had the unintended consequence of hurting an already vulnerable individual.

Steven King (2000) suggests most authors write with one specific reader in mind. In his case it is his wife. In my case that reader became the husband's mother. Whilst I ultimately decided to include potentially upsetting material she had no prior knowledge of, her imagined reaction or response to that information became the filter through which I managed it, and I always tried to write in a manner that treated her and everybody else with respect.

My overriding question after each scene was simply have I done justice to the real participants in my rendition of their story? Have I treated all my characters with dignity? And have I individuated my fictional characters, especially Caro who is so inaccessible, but still preserved the dignity of the source material?

Creating the fictionalised world in the novel

Sean as a character

[Being] “suddenly thrown into the caregiving role and subsequently into acute loss and grief, ... forced to take on very demanding caregiving responsibilities ... without any preparation ... caregivers, as a result, may experience forms of ‘complicated grief’ that are hard to resolve.” (Marwit, S & Kaye, N., 2006 p.1420).

In writing Sean’s character, it was important to show how he is redirected onto a path that dramatically impacts the rest of his life. It is his emotional journey as the primary caregiver that this novel tries to explore in order to cast light on some of the universal emotions that surface when faced with this situation. I have tried to create a construct through which Sean progresses – a construct that incorporates the factors of complicated caregiver grief in accordance with the research findings of Marwit and Kaye (2006):

“Personal Sacrifice Burden (Factor 1)... individual losses in the caregiver’s present life; ... Heartfelt Sadness and Longing (Factor 2) ... the emotional reactions that accompany caregiving; ... and Worry and Felt Isolation (Factor 3) ... the feeling of losing connections and support from others.” (p. 1420).

The consequences of the decisions Sean makes, and the sacrifices and hardship he endures make up the crux of this novel. As the primary protagonist, his process of coming to terms with his unwanted reality embodies several recognisable emotional truths. In developing his character, I have tried to create scenes that illustrate his progression through Fisher’s (2012) ‘*process of personal change*’.

Fisher argues that we transit through all stages in a linear or sequential way although there are no defined boundaries or durations. Rather, each transition is more a “*general realisation that things have subtly changed.*” (Fisher, 2012 p. 7/23). Using the tenets of this research I have tried to move Sean through these stages as he responds to Caro’s inability to be the woman he dreamed of growing old with. He goes from anxiety immediately after the crash, to irrational positivity, fearfulness, feeling threatened, guilty, and depressed, until he moves towards gradual acceptance.

I’m hopeful my rendition of his experience and his responses might resonate with, and perhaps even comfort, anyone reflecting on their own reaction to unanticipated adversity. As Gutkind and Fletcher (2008) write:

“The reader wants to be able to understand and appreciate the ramifications of the narration and the information imbedded in it. If the writer can then help readers think more about the substance of the story, thereby making it more universal, reflection will enrich the reading experience.” (p. 137).

I had to resist the temptation to characterise Sean as saintly. In many ways his journey is as difficult as Caro’s. He too is imprisoned in the situation, but, unlike her, he still has other options available to him. It was essential that Sean’s responses reflect the complexity of the situation he finds himself in. Consequently, the inclusion of some of his choices that might be considered flawed or questionable, is meant to encourage a reader response: what would I have done? As Sontag (2007) says:

“The writers first job is not to have opinions but to tell the truth ... The job of the writer is to make us see the world as it is, full of many different claims and parts and experiences.” (p. 151).

My aim is to portray Sean as a multifaceted character, capable of ambiguity of motive and action, and ambivalent in his emotional mechanisms, a man who is occasionally vulnerable to mistakes and poor judgement. I have tried to present his character as relatable; one that personifies the emotional responses we all might experience to a lesser or greater degree. I want the reader to feel empathy for Sean but also to vacillate between approval and mild distaste because he represents what it is to be a flawed human being. This, in itself, is a recognisable universal truth.

Caro as a character

In the instant of the helicopter crash, the trajectory of Caro Barker’s life ratchets irreversibly in a new direction. Forever disabled and unable to speak, she is transformed from a supremely athletic, ambitious, risk-taking young woman to someone completely reliant on Sean’s commitment and the care of others. The subsequent emotional transitions she experiences as a character suffering a TBI follow the findings of Levack, Kayes, & Fadyl (2010):

“The enduring experience of TBI: 1) mind/body disconnect; 2) disconnect with pre-injury self; 3) social disconnect; 4) emotional sequelae; 5) internal and external resources; 6) reconstruction of self identity; 7) reconstruction of a place in the world; 8) reconstruction of personhood.” (p. 986).

In researching how to authentically include Caro's voice in the novel, I uncovered a research paper written by Rene Padilla, an occupational therapist and researcher who studied a similar TBI patient, Clara, who had struggled similarly to Caro. In Clara's case, she recovered to a point where she could eventually communicate fairly coherently. She articulated her experiences during the years of her rehabilitation through a number of interviews and written communications with the researcher. I drew heavily on these findings, and the research gave me the confidence to continue with the development of the themes around Caro's thinking and dialogue. Padilla (2003) writes:

“Clara's experience in the present is frequently marked by memories of her life before the accident and comparisons of who she is now to who she was before, or who she might have become had she not sustained a head injury ... [her] view of the past was created in the present by her retrospective look upon it. She described a sense of simply living in the past, unaware of its meaning at the time. It was her present life that gave her a sense of what she had irrevocably lost and made fond memories bittersweet.” (p. 417).

I have attempted to recreate this experience for Caro with the tightly limited use of flashbacks and recall. Her memory of her own importance in her dynamic past is accentuated, especially in comparing it to the relentless drudge of her present and future. The emotions and experiences I describe for Caro were validated in the research interviews with Clara: Padilla (2003):

“I have a sense of total aloneness and isolation that I started to feel in my rehabilitation and the threat has never left me ... I couldn't talk, I couldn't move. I could understand perfectly what was going on around me, but I'd get frustrated because I couldn't tell them how wrong they were when they'd tell my sister or father that I would only function at a 'reflex level' the rest of my life – that I probably didn't have much of a mind left. I felt like screaming!” (p. 418).

Similarly, Caro spends much of her first few years post-accident 'screaming' and being talked over. In the writing, I kept her internal dialogue (as available to the reader) as limited and constrained as her abilities at that point. She sometimes disrupts the narrative, as she would have in that early, disassociated phase of her recovery. In later scenes whilst her thinking is more complex, it is restricted and kept to the minimum in the manuscript, just as her daily interaction and contributions are restrained and minimal.

In Padilla's research Clara uses the word abandonment frequently and in many different forms. She felt abandoned by everything she once knew, by everyone she knew and even by her body and by her will to live. She writes:

"I was trapped in the most desperate way. I could understand what people were saying to me and about me, and my mind panned and thought it executed the movements needed to speak, but nothing would come out." (p. 418).

In the novel, Caro suffers the same affliction, aphasia, and she only ever recovers a limited ability to speak. Her interior monologue is italicised to accentuate the stark difference in her thinking ability as opposed to her speaking ability, and to highlight some sense of her frustration.

Caro's direct role in the novel is deliberately sparse. This is partly necessary because she is actually locked away from everybody by her condition, but also as an aesthetic choice for the novel itself. She is kept the shadows and often overlooked as the plot line progresses, just as in her world she is trapped on the sidelines with no means to contribute in any way other than through the kindness and patience of Sean and her carers. For this reason I chose to heavily weigh the point of view (POV) proportion away from her and in favour of Sean.

Focalisation

An extra dimension in the creation of the narrative voice and focalisation was part of the process because my characters speak for real people. Certainly during the early adaptations of the draft, I could hear the voices of the interview participants. The focalisation of Sean and Caro was especially important because I wanted to portray their personalities as closely to the real characters as possible. However, as the fictional portrayal of the characters progressed, it became more important that Sean and Caro developed their own internal organic logic that was wedded to the fictional rendering of the story.

Because the story spans twenty-five years, I wanted to include valuable perspective from several minor characters like his mother, Caro's mother and the carers. I decided to use multiple 3rd person because it gave me access to the interiority of these different characters.

My primary motivation for writing this book was to investigate the responses of those in a caring situation, and not the victim of an accident, or sufferer of an affliction. However, as the novel advanced, the more I learned about Caro as a character, and the more I reflected on the circumstances surrounding her life, the more I became inclined to include her voice in the story. The challenge then was to keep her role pared back so that the reader's focus wasn't redirected to her tragic story to the neglect of Sean's journey.

The italicised passages in the creative thesis, which was Caro's interior voice, had to be wholly fictionalised. It was impossible for me to access what the real victim thinks. I had neither the time nor the experience necessary to facilitate an understanding of her expression of these passages from my interviews with her. So in researching my rendition of Caro as a character, I referred to the victim's husband, carers, family and friends to corroborate that the experiences or reactions I created for Caro were in fact valid or viable as an authentic portrayal of her character. Everything Caro experiences or expresses in the novel would have been possible at some point in reality, although I made an authorial decision to accelerate and conflate the progression of her internal dialogue for the purposes of moving the fictional plot forward.

In deliberating the novelty aspect of writing the novel from Caro's point of view, I concluded that it was highly likely that she had neither the ability nor the desire to understand what the impact her disability has had on Sean's life. Additionally, there was no way to adequately express Sean's decisions or emotional journey from her perspective, and this was my *raison d'être* behind the entire undertaking. However, thinking about it helped me quantify the value and structure of her input, and resulted in my decision to slowly develop the intensity in her thinking and speech in tandem with her cognitive recovery, starting simply, with short ideas and unfinished thoughts:

"Rain - that's what it is." (Haworth, 2016, p. 36).

And steadily becoming more complex in line with her developing level of intellectual awareness:

"I was scared you'd fallen. That you were injured and taken away. What would happen then? Who would care for me? No one else wants me." (Haworth, 2016, p. 96).

Of everything in the novel, Caro's interior monologue is the most wholly fictionalised aspect because the research could only take me to a certain point. Her internal dialogue is kept concise, occasionally grammatically incorrect, and without the nuances of courtesy and good manners. Additionally, there were two tasks to be considered in presenting her thoughts, firstly as an imagined vernacular to fit her character, and also the vernacular that complied with the likely thought processing of a TBI patient.

Letting go of the facts

"Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction – so we are told." (Woolf 1989, p. 16).

As a first time novelist, starting with a factual story was empowering because there was no need to doubt the authenticity of my material ideas. The substantial body of interview material I had transcribed could verify every movement and thought of my characters. At the outset, the facts of this story seemed more compelling than any fiction to me and I believed the manuscript could probably have been better justified as a biography but I'd made the decision to write it as a novel. However, I now know the output would have been significantly drier and the content would have been of relevance to only a very small readership.

In realising the character arcs in the novel, I ran into a barrage of personal doubts and I found it extremely difficult to let go of my factual security blanket. It took me a long while to discard large swathes of specific research and move away from clinging rigidly to the facts. As Rainer (1997) suggests:

"[I was] offended by the fusion of memory and imagination ... panicking the mixing of stories with fictional techniques [was] impure" (p. 34).

Learning to traverse from the factual content to fictional imaginings was the greatest challenge I faced in writing this manuscript. Essentially I had to go through two stages of adaptation; firstly I adapted the source material into a factual chronological story line, and, secondly, I adapted that timeline and plot sequence into fictionalised scenes that reflected the character development I wanted to investigate. This process of adaptation allowed me to compress important messages into manageable scenes that a

reader could digest without being dragged into tedious factual timeframes. I learned from Rainer (1997) that:

“The memoirist and the novelist can travel into each other’s lands because they speak a similar language of story, character, theme, setting, scene and dialog ... If you decide ultimately that you want the greater invention and tightening of fiction, your work will resonate with the truth if you begin with the autobiographical process.” (p. 322).

In re-drafting, I learned it was possible to protect the integrity of the factual information within imagined scenes, and those fictionalised scenes proved more effective in reaching the emotional truths that I wanted to address. The understanding that the biographical information would still resonate through my fictional rendition of events finally allowed me to become braver in adapting the content.

In creating the constructs of Sean and Caro, I realised I had to write creatively anyway, because even with full informational facts, I still had to imagine the footsteps and emotional verisimilitude of my characters at any given moment, even with the full informational facts made available to me. As Hemley (1994) writes:

“The point is not whether every detail is completely accurate ... the point is, is it a good story? Does it say something true about human relationships, about our tentative place in the world? Does it evoke a time and place outside of our own? If the answer to these questions is yes, [it does not matter] whether it’s called a memoir or a novel.” (p. 39).

I was well into the drafting process before I truly grasped a definitive notion: regurgitating the truth was less important than constructing a good fictional story where something useful could be said about human relationships. I finally found the confidence to move into the realm of imagined dramatic story, which allowed the novel to start taking form.

Letting go of loyalty

“The fact that something really happened does not make it good fiction ... the trick comes in moulding the factual material to the specifications of one’s fictional world ... The most important fact to keep in mind is that a transformation is always involved. (Hemley, 1994, p. 3).”

I found it challenging to transform my interpretation of anecdotal information into scenes that fitted what I wanted to share with the reader, regardless of the context

originally related to me. It was difficult to find the freedom to run with a theme because the factual information or setting continually got in the way. In the transformation I continually had to answer the question where does my loyalty lie? Effectively, once I decided to write the story as a novel, my only loyalty should have been to the realisation of the novel.

In a novel, I knew the answer to the question of loyalty should be nil, because every writer should carry an existing loyalty to their created characters in any case, simply because it would be an affront or offence not to. However, in this case, my proximity to the real participants, and the vulnerability of the accident victim, meant I was constantly being pulled between the subtle territories of what impact the novel would have on them, versus an irrelevant work of fiction. It was my responsibility to find an appropriate balance, and I trod a fine line between the two forces, mindful that neither the couple nor I wanted to end up with something that read like a biography.

As it turned out, the arc of the narrative in real life does work for this novel. And if there had been no conflict, this story would be of little interest. The human flaws evident in the real story worked in my favour as a novelist. Hemley (1994) says:

“Fiction does not necessarily reflect the world as it should be, but as it is, and that means chronicling conflict [that] ... often deals with making moral choices, and sometimes making the wrong ones. If you write about the world as it is, and not as you’d like it to be, you will definitely offend someone.” (p. 78).

I have tried to reveal the humanity of my characters and make any flaws recognisable to all readers because we share a common emotional truth. However, I have been concerned my fictional portrayal of certain events would upset my interviewees when they read scenes that no longer accurately reflected the information they had imparted. I worried about the impact of conflating memories that were precious or sacred to their understanding of how well they’d managed the situation. Gutkind (2012) argues:

“Rounding the corners or compressing characters or incidents isn’t absolutely wrong but ... make certain you have a justifiable reason ... consider the consequences to you and the people about whom you are writing.” (p. 42).

In the end my fall back position was not factual accuracy because this is a novel. Instead I focussed entirely on emotional truth to portray the journey that Sean and Caro

travelled. However, I was never influenced to write something as part of the story that did not protect the dignity of my characters, and I never allowed my characters to think or do anything that the real life participants were incapable of thinking or doing. Scenes that may have worked dramatically but that would have been disloyal to the true participants became a contested space that, while not true of every project converting fiction to nonfiction, certainly felt inescapable here. This was never simply a catalogue of an interesting life, and the potential damage that my writing could do had to be considered at all times.

Because I had transcribed the exact words research subjects had used, there was an added element to the loyalty issues in that that they would feel betrayed or disappointed, perhaps thinking, “but that not what I said, or “that’s not how it went.” It took every ounce of courage to let go of my reliance on my recorded conversations and transform them into imagined dialogue, which developed scenes with some purpose.

Transitioning through large chunks of time made it necessary to condense and compress the timeline, and the adaptation of the order of some incidents to better inform the novel. Again, it was challenging letting go of a strict adherence to the factual timeline, and also of omitting several significant phases in the couples’ life when no obvious purpose was served in my fictional characters’ development. As a result, some transitions remain too stark and disjointed, and may require modifications in a later draft.

Conclusion

“Troubled with levels and degrees, mixed with fact, memory and interpretation, truth in storytelling is rarely black and white ... Fiction explores the emotional truth of the human experience. As Picasso said, “Art is that lie that makes us realize the truth.”” (Gutkind & Fletcher, 2008, p. 149).

The emotional truths I have attempted to investigate and portray in this novel are part of all of our worlds. Having access to the couple’s true story afforded me an invaluable opportunity to reflect on these issues in a way I would never have attempted without observing their lives so intensely.

While attempting to respectfully fictionalise their story, and battling with the trials of compressing, condensing, adapting and transforming those facts into story, I was concerned I might contaminate their experience with my own prejudices and comment

in my rendering of it. Ultimately I realised I had to form some opinion to get to the emotional journey I wanted to share. As Rosenblatt (2001) says:

“For your writing to be great ... it must be useful to the world. And for that to happen you must form an opinion of the world ... observe the world, closely and steadily, with a mind open to change ... and not pretend it is someone else’s world you are writing about.” (p. 150).

And so I’ve written about the universal responses I think we experience in a world that doesn’t always provide happy endings or obvious solutions. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he suggested that all such experience in tragedy results in a cathartic climax. As Fergusson (1961) writes:

“The masters of tragedy, like good cooks, mingle pity and fear in the right proportions. Having given us fear enough, they melt us with pity, purging us of our emotions, and reconciling us to our fate, because we understand it as the universal human lot. Aristotle’s word for this effect is “purgation” or “catharsis.” (p. 35).

I have attempted to offer a moment of climatic catharsis for Sean. I would like to think the inevitability of the path he chooses may provide some peace to others thrust into similar situations, and the emotional truths I have included might allow this literature to resonate with a wider reading audience.

In the writing, this book changed entirely from my original expectations, growing in some aspects and diminishing in others, but I learned and benefitted personally in ways I never imagined. Whilst my experience of extended adversity was entirely different from the characters’, the emotional struggles were familiar. Surprisingly, I found my own unexpected catharsis. I couldn’t provide any answers but I learned that our human responses, positive and negative, are often formulaic, and somehow that seemed comforting.

Throughout the project, I worked with the idea that this novel should be of some importance to the real world couple on whom I have based the novel on. As a mark of respect, I offered the manuscript to the husband to read and redact before my submission for examination. Whilst he easily recognised the scenes were fictionalised, he felt my characters were developed as a fair and dignified representation of the real people behind the story.

Most importantly, he was deeply moved by the draft of the novel, so I hope that in some small way this accomplishes what Rosenblatt (2011) quotes poet A D Hope as writing:

“Nothing you write will matter unless it moves the human heart.” (p.151).

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