

Review of *Making Stories: How Australian Novels Were Written*, by Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe. *JAS Review* 4 (Jan 2002).

Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written* Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin: 2001 (1993). RRP \$24.95.

Review by Kate Douglas

‘The writer’ features prominently on the surface of contemporary literary culture, through public readings, book signings, writer’s festivals, and interviews. Such events commonly celebrate the writer as author: the writer is a creator, an intellectual, and often a celebrity. There is little doubt that in the promotion of culture (whether it be popular or literary), ‘the personal’ is profitable. It is very common for writers and even critics to be drawn into giving autobiographical accounts of their involvement in particular theoretical or creative pursuits. Interestingly, at a time when two, or perhaps even three generations of literary theorists have primarily been raised on the notion that authorial intention is almost irrelevant to the text, in the contemporary world of creative writing, authorial intention has, if anything, become even more crucial to a book’s success.

The contemporary veneration of the individual writer-as-author continues with the re-release of *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written* by Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe (originally published in 1993). *Making Stories* explores “how particular works of fiction came about” (xi). More specifically though, Grenville and Woolfe are investigating how writers revised their work: the development of written work that ultimately became a successful novel. One agenda of this text seems to be to eradicate outdated preconceptions of authorship. These preconceptions or stereotypes include writers as an artistic ‘elect’ (more inspiration than perspiration), or the idea that writers are supremely confident, even arrogant about their work and ideas. Grenville and Woolfe write: “we wanted to erode the idea that the writer is someone unlike other people,

someone to whom the Muse has simply dictated a masterpiece” (xi). *Making Stories* seeks to provide evidence of writing as a working process. Such texts, alongside the increased public visibility of writers, confirm that where writing was once thought to be a private activity, it is becoming increasingly public and also institutionalised (for example in creative writing education programs and writing groups or government funding initiatives for writers).

In their introduction to *Making Stories*, Grenville and Woolfe emphasise how they had to overcome the preconceptions they had of the writing and editing processes (for example, their own distinctions between drafting, revising and writing were alien to many of the writers they interviewed). This challenging of presumptions seems appropriate as *Making Stories* asks its readers to address their previous notions about writers and writing as they read each chapter and note the diverse stories and approaches employed by the different authors.

The individual chapters focus on the writing of a particular Australian novel (there are ten in all). Each chapter has an extract from an early, pre-publication draft, an extract from the published version of the novel, and an interview with the author (apart from Patrick White who was not alive when *Making Stories* was produced). Photocopies of draft notes introduce each chapter, to perhaps verify the authenticity of the task. These components work together admirably, but by far the most engaging aspect of each chapter is the interviews. The interviews work to explain all of the other material, and as *Making Stories* privileges authorial “creation” and “method” of “artistic control and selection” (xiii) in its introduction, this encourages readers to do the same.

The interviews function as a form of FAQ and contain many of the questions frequently asked of writers at writer’s festivals or in media interviews. Jessica Anderson discusses her writing of *The Commandment*, the historical research she undertook and her resistance to planning the novel other than a sense of its “shape”. The interviewer tests out preconceptions of writer’s personalities by asking Elizabeth Jolley and Peter Carey about their everyday experiences of writing (casting them as ‘every day people’).

Questions also invite writers to admit their weakness as writers, Peter Carey obligingly responds, “when you begin writing you’re in a basic state of stupidity because you don’t know anything.” (35). Another recurring factor is the writers’ acknowledgement of intertextuality: the novels that influenced their writing, and also the prolific note taking of authors such as Helen Garner, David Ireland and Elizabeth Jolley. This works as a post-modern admission of how everything contributes to the writing process and how everything a writer sees or hears is a potential influence. Apart from these recurring themes, *Making Stories* is satiated with interesting slices of information such as Helen Garner’s listening to music when she writes or that Thomas Keneally writes his books serially.

Ultimately though *Making Stories* contradicts its basic tenets, to unveil “how ten Australian novels were written” however this may be an advantage rather than a failing. The extracts and interviews consistently assert that the writing process is multifarious, unpredictable and its origins unknowable. Many of the writers assert that what works for them will unlikely work for other writers (and this is perhaps best evidenced through the examples presented in *Making Stories*). Peter Carey seems to revel in making his writing processes mysterious and entirely non-transparent: “It’s very romantic to say writing is like a madness, but it is a little bit.” (35); he asserts, “I’m continually losing my way”. For Carey voices are “totally intuitive . . . I just kept on writing until it felt right.” (38) Similarly Thomas Keneally believes himself to be “an instinctive writer”, and affirms the unconscious processes of writing. (186). Even if *Making Stories* affirms these notions through their inclusion, it seems preoccupied (as popular culture does) with somehow measuring the extent to which writers are creators or receivers of artistic production. For example one question asked to most of the writers is the extent to which they thought they were “discovering, uncovering or inventing”; seemingly this is the central mystery of authorship. What *Making Stories* eventually leaves the reader with is the probability that the assorted ambiguities of the writing processes seem to be increasing rather than decreasing.

Though it provides valuable insights, *Making Stories* by no means a step-by-step guide to how these novels were written. As Grenville and Woolfe write in their introduction “we had intended to demystify the process, but in the end this did not seem possible. It was another assumption we had to abandon.” (xiv) *Making Stories* was most likely both a professional challenge and a labour of love for its authors. Woolfe and Grenville are both novelists and teachers of creative writing and fiction. Woolfe is the author of the well-received novels *Leaning Towards Infinity* and *Painted Woman* and the creative writing text books *About Literature* and *Literature and Language*. Grenville is the award-winning author of novels such as *Lilian’s Story*, *Dark Places* and *The Idea of Perfection* and of the creative writing text *The Writing Book*. Grenville also has another creative writing text forthcoming titled *Writing from Start to Finish: a Six-step Guide* (2002).

Making Stories will undoubtedly prove useful for scholars, particularly of creative writing (see the “Teacher’s Notes” in the back of the text) indeed this book is featured in university creative writing courses across the country. *Making Stories* will encourage unpublished writers by demonstrating that the process of writing is an arduous, multifaceted project with many complex variables to consider no matter how experienced you are and what work you are producing. Through reading texts such as *Making Stories*, writers can process such complexities and perhaps forever discard the idea that there is ever such a process as “appropriate writing”.