

Australian Studies in Journalism 7: 1998: 46-73

Birth of a novelist, death of a journalist

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The history of newspapers and novels parallel each other in many ways, yet links between journalism and fiction are often overlooked by The Academy. Founding novels in England and Australia were written by journalists and coincided with the emergence of newspapers. Since the first convict novel was published in 1830 at least 168 Australian journalists have written novels. This article examines journalism-fiction connections with emphasis on the work of Robert Drewe and the realism-fabulism debate.

Journalism and fiction usually are not mentioned in the same sentence unless in an unflattering sense, yet they have much in common. Journalist Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is a founding text of the modern novel. It was published a decade after the emergence of England's first daily newspaper. Australia's first novelist, Henry Savery, worked as a journalist before his convict novel, *Quintus Servinton*, was published in 1830. A year later the *Sydney Herald*, which was to become Australia's first regular daily newspaper, began weekly publication. Journalist Marcus Clarke wrote the most successful convict novel, *His Natural Life*, published in 1874.

The development of newspapers and novels was associated with technological, social and economic change that contributed to the rise of the reading class. Stewart (1988, pp.179-180) suggests that

literary Australia was largely a journalists' Australia. According to Henningham (1994, p.315), journalism in colonial Australia inherited a fully developed tradition of English literary journalism. A symbiotic relationship developed between newspapers and novels in that Australia's early novelists could not write fiction without the prop of journalism in providing supplementary income. In addition, newspapers were, and remain, forums for critiquing, promoting and publishing literature. They also have served as a training ground for some of literature's greatest novelists, including Dickens, Twain, Zola and Hemingway. In Australia Prichard, Johnston, Masters, Moorhouse and Drewe are among novelists with journalistic backgrounds.

Drewe in particular has drawn on his journalistic experience in his novels and short stories. This connection will be examined more closely in the next section of this article, which also will consider links between fiction and feature writing.

Somerset Maugham (1938, p.19) says no writer can afford to ignore news and newspapers: "It is raw material straight from the knacker's yard and we are stupid if we turn our noses up because it smells of blood and sweat". Dostoevsky, who regularly contributed items to his newspaper-editor brother, also saw value in a literary view of life through newspapers:

In any newspaper one takes up, one comes across reports of wholly authentic facts, which nevertheless strike one as extraordinary. Our writers regard them as fantastic, and take no account of them and yet they are the truth, for they are facts. But who troubles to observe, record, describe them (Allott 1962, p.68)?

Through a survey of biographical dictionaries this writer has thus far identified at least 168 Australian novelists since Savery with journalistic experience. Fifty-eight fiction writers have been noted in *The Good Reading Guide* (Daniel 1988) as having journalistic experience. If 58 taxi drivers had been listed one suspects The Academy would be asking whether driving taxis inspires fiction. Yet there is a

dearth of scholarly work on journalism-fiction connections by English and journalism academics in Australia and overseas.

Bennett (1989, p.5) cites the “relative critical neglect” of some Australian novelists with journalistic experience and refers to the “dandyism” displayed by some academics. He says university literature departments deride “literary journalism” and notes “slighting references” to the journalism experience of Australian novelists who worked as reporters. In his view Patrick’s White’s much-quoted phrase about novels that are “the dreary dun-coloured off-shoots of journalistic realism” retains a condemnatory force.

Australia is not alone. According to Fishkin (1985, p.3) the list of America’s most imaginative writers is crowded with novelists who served journalistic apprenticeships. She expresses surprise it has received so little attention:

Critics and scholars of American literature have paid a price for this neglect. By glossing over the continuities between the journalism and fiction of these great writers they have missed an important aspect of American literary history and biography. By failing to focus on the discontinuities between their journalism and their fiction they have lost an opportunity to gain special insight into the limits and potential of different narrative forms.

Writing and research skills obviously can be developed outside a journalistic framework. Thomas Keneally and Truman Capote are just two of many who have done so. However journalism is the most logical profession in which to develop such skills. This does not mean all journalism enables all fiction or that all journalists are latent novelists. Journalism may simultaneously aid and hinder fiction. It provides front-row exposure to life’s grand themes but, in so doing, may jaundice the observer to life’s grand possibilities. It may teach writing but of a kind that fits like a straitjacket. While Hemingway credited the *Kansas City Star* stylebook for teaching him the best rules of writing (Fishkin 1985, p.137) he also warned journalism “can be a daily self-destruction for a serious creative writer”

(Cowley 1963, p.190). In Australia, Drewe cites the profession's cynicism as an obstacle to fiction but says journalistic training has advantages.

Robert Drewe: author-journalist

Robert Drewe is Australia's most prominent journalist-novelist in that he has won awards for reportage and fiction. He has won two Walkley Awards (1976, 1981) and written five novels and two books of short stories, including *The Bodysurfers*, which became a TV mini-series. *Fortune* (1987) won the National Book Council's Banjo Award for fiction. It can be argued journalism helped prepare him for fiction and made him a better, and certainly a different, novelist than he otherwise would have been.

Drewe undertook a cadetship with the *West Australian* on his 18th birthday and credits the profession with educating him. Becoming a journalist seemed a romantic notion. It offered travel and adventure while he was being paid for it (Hart 1988, p.5). "Unless you have a family fortune, like one or two prominent writers, you have to do something to make a living, and being a cub reporter . . . is a better training ground than most" (Baker 1989, p.75).

Drewe's first novel was *The Savage Crows* (1976). He did not tell his journalistic colleagues he had been working on a novel until it was about to be published: "You know what journalists are like. There would have been the Hemingway cracks and 'how's Scott Fitzgerald this morning'" (Brown 1998)? First novels often are chiefly autobiographical and *The Savage Crows* is no exception. It tells the story of young journalist Stephen Crisp who, thanks to an Australia Council grant, quits his job to research and write about the genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines. That is similar to Drewe's circumstance in writing his first novel. Crisp's mother died after he married and had a child against her wishes. That too occurred to Drewe. Near the book's end the central character is asked: "You

could do us a favour, sport . . . Know anyone in the media” (Drewe 1976, p.262)?

Drewe says *The Savage Crows* was well received, although at the time with some surprise, “like here is a dog that can ride a bicycle and play a trumpet at the same time, which was sort of flattering and slightly offensive” (Willbanks 1992, p.65). He said his transition to fiction entailed a grudging acceptance because of Australia’s tradition that novelists either came from the School of Hard Knocks — “the realist, outback, dingo-trapping background” — or from English Departments.

I was given the feeling now and then that “how dare I bring my tacky Grub Street ways to the noble art of Anglo-Australian letters”. It may have been easier if I hadn’t had a well-known by-line. Reviewers are romantics. They prefer to discover you. It gives them some credence in the literary process. I think that a pathetic lace-curtain provincial snobbery still exists in some English departments and in the minds of some reviewers, some of whom are journalists who would have preferred to be novelists (Baker 1989, p.74-75).

Drewe says mainstream Australian journalists distrust those with the “faintest intellectual claims”, adding that journalists regard themselves as great destroyers of intellectual pretensions (Baker 1989, p.76). And it seems they will never let him forget he once was one of them. He notes he was a journalist for 10 years and has been a novelist for 22 but because most interviewers are journalists the journalist/novelist question always comes up:

They don’t say ‘schoolteacher and novelist Helen Garner’ or ‘advertising man and novelist Peter Carey’. I mean, they’re allowed to have the occupation they’ve had for the major part of their lives. So in a way it does grate slightly (Brown 1998).

Drewe says there is a strangely naive view that if a former teacher writes a novel it is a wonderful fantasy. But if a former journalist writes fiction then he or she must be going through their old notebooks (Baker 1989, p.77). Some critics appear to focus more on the presumed journalistic qualities of Drewe’s fiction than its

poetic energy. In *The Savage Crows* he makes intertextual reference to White's quote about journalism. His narrator was "overseeing a flock of dun-coloured sheep" (Drewe 1976, p.146). Then: "Dun-coloured animals hesitated, drew quick breaths and scampered from our path" (Drewe 1976, p.158).

Drewe seems ambivalent on a journalistic characteristic — distrust of intellectuals — that may contribute to the tension between the media and The Academy. He comments: "Journalists regard themselves as being great destroyers of intellectual pretension." This view extends into newspapers where the arts section is regarded as "Wankers' Corner or the Poofter Pages" (Baker 1989, p.76). Fishkin (1985, p.4) agrees journalism apprenticeship teaches reporters "to be mistrustful of rhetoric, abstractions, hypocrisy and cant".

Drewe's second novel, *A Cry in the Jungle Bar* (1979), is set in Asia, where Drewe was sent for journalistic assignments. While the protagonist is an Australian academic rather than a journalist, a newspaper columnist is a key character through which much plot and narrative information flow. Bennett (1989, p.1) observes that, at one level, the novel is a "news" story in its graphic observations. Newspapers are presented as pursuers of truth and used as communication tropes. The protagonist lives in a housing estate, developed by newspaper publishers, called The Fourth Estate. Drewe takes him on a jog that carries the reader past Stop Press Avenue, Headline Boulevard and Extra Avenue (Drewe 1979, pp.16-17).

Journalism is most prominent in Drewe's third novel, *Fortune* (1986). One edition even depicts a newspaper clipping on the cover. The book can be read as a critique and even a condemnation of journalism. It also can be read as Drewe's self-created platform for telling "truths" in fiction that he could not tell in journalism. The narrator, "Bob", is a journalist and novelist who comments on journalism's limitations and foibles. He laments that:

... journalism reduces most of its stories to political considerations. Matters are defined in terms of where the power lies, who opposes whom or what, where the special interests are. Nevertheless in 1983 I began blithely writing the story — the story as it stood then — as journalism. I stuck to publishable facts. I know the publishable facts are never enough but I thought then that straightforward reporting would be adequate to the task (Drewe 1986, pp.18-19).

“Bob” the novelist writes that journalism disregards “imagination and subjectivity” (Drewe 1986, p.68). It creates instant celebrities who may be dropped “like a hot coal and allowed to fizzle out” (p.115). Journalists like to “stop time . . . to mark an X in the air where the bullet stopped” (p.162) yet “the smell of crime wasn’t something you could capture in a newspaper paragraph” (p.143). Bob also says a reporter with 10 years’ experience [like Drewe] in a country as small as Australia feels not only that he has interviewed everyone but has done so at least twice. Drewe has made the same point about interviewing repetition during a media interview (Waldren 1996, p.13).

The core events in *Fortune* are based on incidents Drewe the journalist reported on for the *Bulletin*. They centre on a shady treasure hunter who becomes a media creation. Ultimately he commits suicide during a trial at which Drewe appeared as a witness. “Bob” begins *Fortune* by asserting journalism could not begin to tell the story that unfolds (Drewe 1986, p.18). The medium’s practices and restrictions frustrated the story Drewe sought to tell in his journalism so he has to tell the truth through fiction. Yet without journalism the fortune hunter’s saga would not have unfolded in fiction.

In pursuing “truth” Drewe may have felt his fiction would let him flee journalism yet he has found himself typecast by some as a novelist/journalist hybrid. According to Brady (1988b, p.88) Drewe’s “glancing allusion to life” troubles many readers and critics and inspires them to accuse him of being a “mere journalist” writing a *roman a clef*. She also cites his first novel’s “journalistic accuracy of the descriptions” (1989, p.65).

Walker (1987, pp.106-107) argues Drewe's books often exhibit disrespect for conventional divisions between fact and fiction. She cites passages in *Fortune* — “which characteristically emphasise the significance of the reporter” — about John Glenn's orbit over Perth. Walker notes the passages are similar to those in Drewe's journalism. The reader, she continues, might wonder about the distinction between the writer as journalist and the writer as novelist. She concludes: “The real differences seem to lie in the circumstances of their publication rather than in claims about the representation of ‘truth’ or ‘the universe’.”

No greater gulf exists between academe and journalism than definitions and perceptions of “truth”, “facts” and “fiction”. Fact and fiction are not mutually exclusive in fiction as they are, one hopes, in journalism. New Journalism uses fiction techniques but fictive invention is another matter. The parading of fiction as fact in journalistic garb creates serious ethical, not to mention legal, dilemmas. The “non-fiction novel” rose to prominence with Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966). Since then terms like “faction” and “fictuality” have taken form.

The journalist's difficulty is that “facts” and “truth” are more likely to be debated in a courtroom than a lecture theatre. The consequences are vastly different, even if the legal system does not always get at the truth. In fiction or journalism it can be argued “truth” is more a reader than a writer function. After all, truth's ultimate repository rests with each individual. This makes truth telling all the more important because, as Russell states, our knowledge primarily is from description rather than experience (quoted in Tallis 1988, p.23).

Journalism must contend with the frustrations involved in pursuing a truth that might be defensible in court but inadequate to the higher, harder task of truth telling: the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In *Fortune* “Bob” complains that:

In my experience journalism has enough trouble with the libelous, the abstract and the subjective. Its attention span is too short. Anyway, its space limitations prevent the true and continuous tracking of connections. Journalism shies away from psychology. For all its nosy reputation it mostly ignores the private life and rarely sees the larger truth (Drewe 1986, p.18).

Manoff and Schudson (1986, p.6) argue: "Journalism, like any other story-telling activity, is a form of fiction, operating out of its own conventions and understandings." According to Hartley (1996, p.83): "News is characterized by image, symbol, story telling, fiction, fantasy, propaganda and myth — all the baggage of textuality and culture which is traditionally dismissed by journalists." Hartley may be correct, in a lecture theatre. In a newsroom, it is doubtful his definition would placate an irate reader.

News reporting and truth seeking have different purposes. Lippmann (quoted in Epstein 1975, p.3) argues "news" and "truth" collide in a few limited areas, such as in footie scores. Of course there can be quibbling about that too. Lippmann continues: "The function of news is to signalize an event. The function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act." The reporter gathers facts and opinions that often are in conflict and invites readers to determine "truth". After all, "one person's probable fact can be seen by another person as a probable lie. This is one reason why people have differences of opinion" (Henshall & Ingram 1991, p.5).

Drewe remarks that *Fortune* is, in part, about journalism's inability to get to the truth (Brown 1998). The narrator speaks of journalism's "facts" and "non-facts" in which "truth" is not necessarily true and "non-facts" are not necessarily false (Drewe 1986, p.129). Journalism imposes its own form of order on facts and events in order to draw readers' attention to the day's happenings. This violates the larger truth of a chaotic universe (p.234). But this is true in fiction as well. Tallis (1988 p.21) agrees realistic narrative fiction

distorts reality and notes Barthes' comment (1977, p.146) that agreement between a text and the world outside it is an illusion. In that sense all stories are untrue, for to have life proceed in an orderly manner as it does within a text would be like trying to catch time by the tail (Sartre 1965, p.63).

Drewe's fourth novel, *Our Sunshine* (1991), is told in the first person and based on the imagined life of Ned Kelly. He describes it as his "breakthrough novel" that "freed up" his style and his mind (Brown 1998). His intent was to conduct traditional research before beginning the writing. But he said that, faced with the biggest file on any Australian living or dead at the Mitchell Library, he randomly opened a book taken from a shelf and it fell open to a photograph — "the world's first news picture" — of a Kelly gang member who had been hanged. The photograph saddened Drewe. It said much about class and ruling cultures and involved a "tasteless and macabre" display of the body. He said:

Having seen that I left behind the files and didn't bother to look anymore at [Kelly's] character, whether he was good or bad. I just went home and wrote the novel. The only thing I actually researched, I just made a list on one page of a notebook of the actual dates as to what happened and where. (Brown 1998)

In the novel's author note (Drewe 1991 p.183) he cites Kelly letters and three books about the Kelly Gang as part of his research. *Our Sunshine* represents a courageous attempt to parrot Australia's most storied character but it is not Drewe's most successful novel in a commercial or critical sense.

In *The Body surfers* (1983) "Sweetlip", began as a journalistic story in the *Bulletin* for which Drewe won a Walkley Award. A story in *The Bay of Contented Men* (1989), "River Water", also was based on a journalistic assignment.

Bennett (1989, p.9) notes the symbolism in the fact that characters in White's and Stow's fiction rarely read newspapers. Those in Drewe's often do. In *Fortune* (Drewe 1986, p.21) "Bob" remarks

that: “. . . fiction turns up its nose at coincidence, life insists on it”. Whether Drewe believes life, fiction and journalism represent an effective triangulation for the would-be novelist is open to question. He says it is “hard to guess” what effect journalism had on shaping him as a fiction writer but agreed it was “invaluable” in giving him a “brusk shove” into what goes on in the world (Willbanks 1992, p.60).

I really like journalism. My whole way of thinking was, in a sense, trained by that. But there came a point when cynicism for its own sake ... look, it's a closed culture, like the police force, and outsiders are regarded suspiciously (Waldren 1996, p.13).

Novelist-journalist Matthew Condon (1998) supports Drewe. He says journalistic training and practice have assisted his own fiction but there is danger of being “enslaved by cynicism”.

In a lot of cases, the better the journalist the worse the novelist. If you can put a foot in both camps — one leg in humanity and the other in the observational side — then I think that's the trick (Condon 1998).

Another novelist-journalist, Susan Johnson (1998), says journalism has enabled her in terms of writing skills, research, discipline and observation. But she says the profession has a limited scope for a creative writer: “In journalism you're showing part of the tapestry where in fiction you're showing the back of the tapestry, a secret self.”

Bennett (1989, p.8) says Drewe's prize-winning journalism has a strong narrative line. To some extent, he adds, his literary form was a built-in component, perhaps even a determining element, in his journalism. With equal force one can speculate his reportorial training and experience flavour his prose style, themes and worldview.

Drewe may have escaped journalism to rescue his creativity from what he sees as relentless journalistic conformity to a mechanistic worldview. However, it is difficult to imagine another profession that could have offered Drewe journalism's breadth and depth of experience, one that binds writing to observation and interaction

at a professional and public level. It is equally difficult to disagree with Bennett (1989, p.15) when he concludes that Drewe's search, "extends well beyond the boundaries of journalism without denying the motivating power of that profession's most persistent ideal, the 'push for truth'."

In sum, journalism is an exemplary training ground for anyone seeking to achieve, in fiction, the basis of what Zola calls the grand style — logic and clarity (Allott 1962, p. 317). A decade as a farmer or insurance salesperson rather than as a journalist would not have prevented Drewe from becoming a novelist. But it may have made him a lesser one. As a journalist he was best known for, and won prizes for, his investigative journalism. It can be argued that feature writing — at which Drewe also excelled — is a superior avenue to fiction.

Feature writing and fiction

In terms of technique feature writing has more in common with short fiction than news reporting. A feature story's building blocks — characterisation, scene building, narrative, dialogue and description — are more aligned with a short story than a news story. Wolfe has written at length about feature writing that reads like a novel. He says feature writers regard newspapers as an overnight stopover en route to the final triumph: *The novel* (Wolfe & Johnson 1975, pp.17-18, 21).

Maugham, among others, has spoken of the creative benefits in drawing fictional characters from living models as opposed to pure invention. Describing real people and places is a feature writer's regular task. Singer describes the feature writer's basic challenge:

If you walk into a room you have to describe what's going on in that room. If you talk to a person, at some point you have to render a portrait of that person. What does the person look like? What are his or her physical characteristics and ties? How does he or she dress? But you don't

dump all those details in the reader's lap at once. The idea is to build a scene, and you build it with these bits of exposition and narration, along with dialogue (Singer 1994, p.87).

For the accomplished feature writer who can develop plotting skills and identify and sustain an engaging theme, the novel is not such a great leap. A "how to" feature writing book based on the *Wall Street Journal Guide* recommends a number of novels as well as John Gardner book, *The Art of Fiction*:

Looking through these books, the student who wants to write better nonfiction will be struck almost forcibly by the concerns he shares with the novelist or short-story writer. No Chinese wall divides writers of fact and writers of fiction. Much more unites them than separates them, a fact the student will appreciate when he studies — not just reads but studies — the work of the best novelists and short-story writers (Blundell 1986, pp. 227-228).

The bridge between fact and fiction that Wolfe helped to build in the "New Journalism" of the 1960s was based on scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, third-person point of view and symbolic detail. In the 1980s the New Journalist was supplanted by the Literary Journalist, whose broadened strategies include "immersion" reporting, accuracy, structure and responsibility. The "literary journalists" have claimed among their number Defoe, Twain, Crane, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Capote, Mailer, Didion and McPhee (Sims & Kramer 1995, pp. 9, 21).

An analysis of literary journalism and New Journalism would show their convergence with fiction, or "faction", and the journalistic recognition that narrative forms are effective in both genres. Research by the American Society of Newspaper Editors has found readers prefer storytelling to the inverted pyramid in news stories. It recommends journalists employ narrative techniques to encourage readers to read more deeply into stories (ASNE 1993, p.24).

The best feature writing, along with the best investigative reporting, can be described as "high journalism". Some may see that as an oxymoron but it can be contended, on the basis of skills re-

quired, that the best journalism can rank with the best short fiction. After all, Pulitzer Prizes are awarded for both journalism and fiction. A Miles Franklin award is more prestigious than a Walkley Award but there is irony in the fact that a journalist, David Bentley, has won a Walkley Award for exposing the true identity of a Miles Franklin winner, Helen Demidenko/Darville.

Fabulism, realism and The Academy

A cynic, perhaps even a realist, might speculate that academics in the study of English have been reluctant to study the connections between reporting fact and writing fiction because it would require them to learn something about journalism. In a hierarchy of discourses journalists may be seen as foothill denizens, cultural outlaws who suppress good, promote evil and murder truth. Bennett observes that:

Such claims to ascendancy of a certain notion of the artist's role above that of the working journalist, and an implied lack of discernment and intelligence in the Australian reading public, have a distinctly aristocratic air, which is not dissimilar in some respects to the dandyism displayed by certain literary theorists of our time (Bennett 1989, p5).

Realism has been out of favour within The Academy and journalists-turned-novelists have been among its chief practitioners. According to Bennett (1989, p.1) university critics prefer "neo-fabulist" fiction writers in Australia as well as in Canada and the US. He believes this deserves investigation. Generally, fabulists and scholars articulate one side of the fabulist-realist debate and realistic writers and journalistic supporters articulate the other. Within this dichotomy is the larger debate among intellectuals whose platforms are from within The Academy and the media, or both. Clouding the debate is that realism and fabulism rarely if ever exist in pure, isolated form. Any work of fiction may consist of a little of one and a lot of the other. Considering them in binary oppo-

sition, however, can inform both ends of the argument and help identify middle ground.

Wolfe's *A Man in Full* (1998) has renewed questions about the values of realism, reporting and entertainment in the novel form. Wolfe remarks:

Even the obvious relationship between reporting and the major novels — one has only to think of Balzac, Dickens, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and, in fact, Joyce — is something that literary historians deal with only in a biographical sense (1975, pp.27-28).

Devine (1999, p.9) wonders what effect Wolfe's "microscopically thorough reporting" would have on neo-fabulism and the readability of Australian novels. A risk exists of over-reaching and artificial polarisation in discussing realism and fabulism. As noted, integrations can occur between fabulist and realistic writing. One form does not obviate the other within the same text. The same kind of melding occurs with fact and fiction. Zavarzadeh uses the term "fictual" in noting the factual and fictional converge in a state of unresolved tension:

. . . the consciousness, engulfed in fabulous reality and overwhelmed by the naked actuality, articulates its experience of an extreme situation. This puzzling merging (is) a zone of experience where the factual is not secure or unequivocal but seems preternaturally strange and eerie (1976, p.56).

A writer's journalistic background does not necessarily lock him or her into realism and its fact-based conventions. Frank Moorhouse has long been identified as a "new fiction" writer. Marquez, a prominent fabulist writer identified with magical realism, says he can see no difference between journalism and a novel: "The sources are the same, the material is the same, the resources and the language are the same" (Plimpton 1985, p.318).

Turner (1986 pp.135,145) notes the term fabulism originated in *The Fabulators* (Scholes 1967). He says it is story creation less dependent on reality than on invented worlds and constructions. Others have used words like fantastic, picaresque, satirical,

metaphysical, allegorical and surrealist. Fabulism also may contain elements of science fiction and myth.

In contrast, realism is what Harry Levin calls “the willed tendency of art to approximate to reality” (Bullock et al. 1988, p.725). It is a method, not an aim (Tallis 1988, p.195). Tallis argues that: “The ‘post-modern’ novel often seems as if it has been written by academics for academics and is often about academics and even, explicitly as well as implicitly, about literary theory” (p.98). The anti-realist stance may be apprehended by Johnson’s paraphrase of McLuhan, who posited that to comprehend an environment one must transcend the consciousness that traps one within it (Johnson 1971, p.xii).

According to Wolfe the intelligentsia has always had contempt for the realistic novel. It is:

... a form that wallows so enthusiastically in the dirt of everyday life and the dirty secrets of class envy and that, still worse, is so easily understood and obviously relished by the mob, i.e., the middle class (Wolfe 1988, p.47).

Turner (1986, p.135) contends realism began its fall in Australia in the 1950s as White’s books began to question natural truths. The Academy has used as its catchcry White’s “dun-coloured” remark (Lawson 1994, p.27). Turner (p.2) says the critical preference for White over Hardy reflects a desire to identify Australian writers comparable to the greats in the English literary canon. He cites Docker’s identification of the “metaphysical ascendancy” in determining the dominant critical model for the best Australian writing. That involves a search for writing that is universal as well as metaphysical. Turner (p.143) believes there is a common assumption that “skepticism and illusion-puncturing realism are Australian virtues”. This, he says, does not adequately value individual effort, hope and the possibility of change. That echoes Barthes’ (1977, p.143) reference to “the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist”.

Turner's views have merit. Indeed he may have been justified in using the word cynicism instead of skepticism. However more weight should be given to reader responsibility and intelligence. Tallis (1988, p.192) argues fantasy imposes passivity on the reader: He either swallows what he is told or is excluded from the story altogether. Readers are not empty receptacles without reference points. They prefer facts to fancy and realism over surrealism in judging how to live, or change, their lives. In offering a picture of the world, skepticism has primacy over its antithesis: gullibility.

Realism and journalism have a duty to puncture illusions because they are illusions. For any society seeking transformation realism can offer the key ingredient: A mirror, however flawed. Ultimately the impetus for hope and change springs from self-recognition. Therefore the ultimate impact of any writing is a reader function, not a writer function. Journalists must communicate to the masses and, in that context, it is worth noting Bennett's speculation about a critic's source of envy: Journalists have an audience (Bennett 1989, p.5).

Fabulism is not a democratising, unifying model. It is an alienating one because it is implausible. According to Tallis (1988, p.99): "Implausibility is no longer the sad result of incompetence but the outcome of an intention to transcend or eschew the conventional modes of competence". Writing without reality's friction, the fabulist can invent new worlds and new rules: "How much easier it is to play tennis without the net" (Tallis 1988, p.108).

Lever observes: "The seeking of transcendence through the novel has remained a strong element in Australian fiction ever since White proposed that god was in a 'gob of spittle'" (Lever 1998, p.329). White (1981, pp.99-100) speaks of being troubled by the relationship between fact and fiction in Australian novels and the tendency of novelists to "explore an autobiographical vein instead of launching into that admittedly disturbing marriage between life and imagination". He says journalists are a different breed from expatri-

ate writers who starve in the absence of their natural sustenance. Journalists, he continues, survive on air roots. "I often envy them their freedom as I sit endlessly at my desk." White (Lawson 1994, p.273) also argues the realistic novel is superficial and remote from art. "A novel should heighten life, should give one an illuminating experience. It shouldn't set out what you know already."

In that view the resulting fiction is a formality, a mere reshaping of prosaic clay. Life is dull. Why keep showing it to us? Meanwhile the post-modern novelists are locked away in their studies, their minds haemorrhaging myths, fables, tale, legends and sagas. It is they against reality and with so much arrayed against it — mainly hallucination — reality can never win. Of course White was not condemning all realism, only the journalistic brand. As Ferrier notes: "It is in fact White's simultaneous engagement with the 'dun-coloured' and the metaphysical that gives his texts . . . their peculiar force" (Ferrier 1998, p.193).

It also should be noted White travelled extensively and this, as opposed to sitting endlessly at his desk, helped shape his worldview. White said: "... in spite of not writing what could be called naturalistic novels you have to keep in touch with fact, which I feel I do". (White 1973, p.138) He added: "I enjoy . . . the accumulation of down-to-earth detail. All my novels are an accumulation of detail. I'm a bit of a bower-bird" (White 1973, p.139).

Condon, like Drewe, has made intertextual reference to White in his fiction. In *The Lulu Magnet* (1996, p.474) a character: "... ran his experienced eye over the dun-coloured undergarment". According to Condon: "He was a monumental bitch . . . but there's some truth in what he says" (Condon 1998). In a 1981 profile Drewe describes White as Australia's most distinguished writer. White tells him: "Unfortunately or not, I was given eyes, hyperactive emotions and an unconscious apt to take over from me" (Drewe 1981, p.27).

In detailing the flight from traditional realism Lever (1998, pp.313-314) cites collections of "new fiction" in books produced

by Daniel (1988) and Kiernan (1977). Two writers are common to both books: Peter Carey and Murray Bail. Daniel describes the “New Novel” as:

A prismatic play of mind, lucid and absurdist, a fabric of hazard, paradox, contradiction, instability — the instability that quantum physics shows us is at the core of things. Objects, things, are surfaces behind which there is an absurd or fantastic reality, sometimes surrealistic, shadows on the surface of the real (Daniel 1988, p.21).

Daniel draws her title from Twain’s observation in *More Tramps Abroad* (1897, p.107) that Australia is “like the most beautiful lies”. In her introduction she notes Carey used the quotation at the beginning of *Illywhacker* (Carey 1985) and that Kiernan used it in his book’s title. She continues: “Peter Carey also quotes Twain *on the lies* of Australian history.” But Twain was using a simile: “It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies.” This does not mean Australian history was a lie. It was *like* a lie, albeit a beautiful one. In fact it was *true*. Daniel goes on to say we sometimes are “duped by [realism’s] untruth” and that: “For me the paradox is that, in the end, Liars are more truthful, because they tell things the way they are in reality.” There are multiple ironies in Twain’s appropriation by the fabulist camp. He had worked as a journalist for 20 years before his first novel was published and once said:

Reporting is the best school in the world to get knowledge of human beings, human nature, and ways. Just think of the wide range of [a reporter’s] acquaintanceship, his experience of life and society (Branch 1969, p.2).

The context of Twain’s observation does not support the fabulists. He had been discussing the origins of Melbourne and reported his discovery that the city’s first house was built by a convict. He wrote: “Australian history is almost always picturesque indeed, it is so curious and strange, that is in itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer, and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place.”

Twain was not referring to *lies* but *novelties*. Novelties are not the inventions fabulists so admire. They are the kinds of things journalists are paid to uncover. But this is the greatest irony: Twain crossed the Pacific to discover Australia's strange truths and transmit them in a form of reportage to an American readership. That would not have happened had he sat endlessly at his desk. Nor would *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* been written, at least in the form in which it appeared, without his experience as an itinerant journalist (Fishkin, 63, 71, 78).

The Twain anecdote is not of great moment. It is symbolic, however, of the debate between realists and fabulists over fiction's fundamental methods and aspirations. Wolfe, for instance, believes the power of great writers "is made possible only by the fact that they first wired their work into the main circuit, which is realism". The fabulist who gives up realism in search of "higher realities" in myth is like the engineer who eschews electricity because it has "been done" (Wolfe and Johnson 31, 57).

Death of the author, birth of the critic

According to Wolfe (1989, p.53) writing is 65 per cent material and 35 per cent talent. That means finding the world in the world, not inside one's own head, which would seem more conducive to neurosis than art. Realism gave verisimilitude to the works of Dickens, Balzac, Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Faulkner and many other novelists. Bonet (1958, p.36) argues realism is possible only "when drawn from living sources. Indirect observation leads to irrealism, to a conventional literature, to the expression of an invented or intuited reality".

Wolfe (1989, pp.52, 55) has spoken of the symbolism in Zola's *Germinal* of the workhorse that was lowered, as a foal, into a mine where it ultimately would be buried because it was too big for the shaft. Such detail was possible because Zola had ventured 50

metres below the earth. Sinclair Lewis moved from New England to Kansas City to write *Elmer Gantry*. Others went to war or sea in the name of experiential primacy. In contrast the fabulist — or the “whimlings” as Tallis (1998, p.101) calls them — seem rarely to venture beyond their own minds. The difficulty for anti-realists is that the best fictive material is in observation, not fantasy.

Barthes (1977, p.148) believes a text’s unity lies in its destination rather than its origins and that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. Brady (1988, p.472) observes the deconstructionists deny a text’s reference to anything outside of itself. That’s like a seismologist who studies earthquakes without reference to their origins. Yet Barthes (1988, p.147) argues that giving a text an author imposes a limit on the text. Identifying the author means the text can be “explained”. The critic can claim victory. In Barthes’ halcyon world there are no authors, only texts, readers and scholars. Least of all, one presumes, are there journalists.

Foucault (1979, pp.159-60) calls for a culture in which fiction would not be limited by an author. He foresees a time when the author-function will disappear. But it would be “pure romanticism”, he concedes, “to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state . . . without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure”. If only clouds could write.

In an author-less Foucault world literary festivals would be problematic. Who could readers turn to for interpretation? Who could supply a humanising element? The obvious answer: The very ones who call for the “death of the author” — critics and scholars. There is some validity to Foucault’s conclusion, which paraphrases Beckett: “What difference does it make who is speaking?” The obvious answer is that, in modern culture, it matters to the reader, not to mention the author. In pre-literate cultures, however, it may not have mattered. The speaker would seem to be irrelevant in oral-based traditions. Stories were told and retold through genera-

tions, whether they provided primitive infotainment or facilitated cultural cohesion and transmission.

This more readily fits Barthes' (1988, p.46) argument that a text is not a line of words but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture". To argue that all writers are, in a sense, plagiarists, implies a curious definition of originality. It would be equally valid to opine every text has been written by one author, the universe's infinite hand, and that every breath we take is linked to every breath ever taken. Humanity is, indeed, the sum total of all it is and all it has ever been. But it is, after all, made up of individuals. Some are authors.

Realism and fabulism are in a parallel "push for truth", crossing and recrossing boundaries between them. Journalism is a companion whether as a critic, observer or participant. Although often unwanted and sometimes ignored it too can arrive at important versions of "truth". It may be posited that fabulism's truth can be more universal but it has a tendency, as Stevens contends, to invent without discovery (quoted in Tallis 1988, p.108).

The realistic writer not only is better equipped to find "truth" but also to communicate it. Walker asserts Wolfe values an unspecific realism but she acknowledges its power:

The view that fabulous or self-conscious narrative is incapable of confronting recognisable experiences and questionable ideologies is, of course, untenable, but obviously writing which addresses historically recognisable injustices has a particularly urgent moral force. (Walker 1987, p.105)

Wolfe (1989, p.5) insists factual details do more than create the authenticity that makes a novel gripping or absorbing. They are essential for literature's greatest effects. If prominent fiction writers continue to ignore them journalists will claim life's richness as well as its literary high ground. To paraphrase Wolfe, if Australia's

fabulists continue to eschew realism they will leave the realists a significant little plot of ground: Australia (Wolfe & Johnson 1975, p.45).

The stuff of realism does not come easily and novelists who sit endlessly at their desks may, in a sense, hasten the death of the author. That would mean the birth of the critic, not the reader. In a 1965-1988 Australian literature survey Bennett (1988, pp.33-34) says a fascination with the reader and the process of reading has not resulted in the "death of the author". He contends "literature" has attained a broad definition that includes essays, journalism, autobiography and historical writings as well as the traditional literary genres of novels, poems and plays. "High" and "low" culture, he argues, no longer are distinguishable.

If that were fully acknowledged by The Academy the links between journalism and fiction may achieve more recognition in scholarly study.

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Appendix: Australian novelists/journalists

Adams, Arthur	Barken, Alan
Aitchison, Ray	Bartlett, Norman
Aldridge, James	Bean, C.E.W.
Astley, William (Price Warung)	Bedford, Jean
Atkinson, Hugh	Bell, Betty
Attiwill, K.A.	Birmingham, John
Baker, Candida	Blunden, Godfrey
Baranay, Inez	Bosi, Pino

Boyd, A.J.	Dickins, Barry
Brickhill, Paul	Drewe, Robert
Bridges, Roy	Dwyer, J.F.
Broderick, Damien	Dyson, Edward
Brown, Max	Ercole, Velia
Buchanan, A.J.	Finlay, Iain
Carey, Gabrielle	Fitzgerald, John Daniel
Carmody, Isobelle Jane	Gambit, Cicada
Casey, Gavin	Garner, Helen
Cato, Nancy	Goode, Arthur
Clarke, Marcus	Grant-Bruce, Mary
Cleary, Jon	Greig, Maysie
Clift, Charmaine	Green, Evan
Cobb, Chester	Grenville, Kate
Cockerill, George	Hadon, Lyndall
Collins, Alan	Hanford, Bruce
Collins, Dale	Hardy, Frank
Collins, Liz	Hayden, Leslie
Condon, Matthew	Hewett, Dorothy
Connolly, Roy	Hill, Barry
Cook, Kenneth	Hill, Ernestine
Cornford, Philip	Horne, Donald
Costello, Elizabeth	Hungerford, T.A.G.
Cox, Erle	James, Clive
Cronin, Bernard	James, Winifred
Cross, Zona	Jefferis, Barbara
Dalley, J.B.	Johnson, Susan
Deamer, Dulcie	Johnston, George
DeBoos, Charles	Johnston, Martin
DeBrune, Aidan	Jones, Margaret
De Garis, C.J.	Kingsley, Henry
Devaney, James	Knowles, Vernon
Dezsery, Andras	Koch, Christopher
d'Alpuget, Blanche	Kohn, Peter

Krausmann, Rudi	Nayman, Michelle
Lane, William	Neville, Jill
Lawson, Henry	Oakley, Barry
Lawson, Will	O'Grady, Desmond
Lee, Gerard	O'Sullivan, Edward William
Lindell, Edward	O'Reilly, John
Lynch, Arthur	Palmer, Vance
Macdonnell, J.E.	Park, Ruth
Mackenzie, Seaforth	Paterson, Banjo
Macklin, Robert	Pearl, Cyril
Maniaty, Tony	Penton, Brian
Mann, Cecil	Porter, Hal
Mant, Gilbert	Porter, Peter
Marlowe, Mary	Pratt, Ambrose
Marshall, William Leonard	Prichard, Katharine Susannah
Martin, David	Quinn, Patrick
Matthew, Ray	Quinn, Roderick
Mass, Nuri	Reed, Bill
Masters, Olga	Rees, Arthur
Maccallum, Mungo	Rosa, S.A.
McCombie, Thomas	Rosman, Alice Grant
McCullough, Colleen	Rowbotham, David
McGregor, Craig	Ruhen, Olaf
McKellar, John	Sandes, John
McKie, Ron	Savery, Hugh
McKinney, Jack	Sayers, E.E.
McMillan, Robert	Scott, Nathalie
McNally, Ward	Sheiner, Robin
Milliss, Roger	Skinner, Mollie
Moffitt, Ian	Slessor, Kenneth
Moore, Tom	Sligo, John
Moorehead, Alan	Southall, Ivan
Moorhouse, Frank	Spence, Catherine Helen
Moxham, Wilda	Smith, James

Stephens, A.G	Turnbull, Clive
Stivens, Dal	Tzoumakas, Dimitris
Swan, Nathaniel	Walford, Frank
Talbot, Colin	Walstab, George
Taylor, G.A.	Whittington, Don
Tennant, Kylie	Williams, Maslyn
Tom, Emma	Wyatt, Geoff
Trail, W.H.	Zavos, Spiros

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