WRITING **HISTORIES**

IMAGINATION AND NARRATION

EDITED BY **ANN CURTHOYS** AND **ANN MCGRATH**

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© Mandy Martin and Tom Griffiths. Detail from *Flood below the Shearing Shed. 16 February*. 1999. Oil, ochre, pigment on linen. 90x330 cms. The painting is from the environmental project: Watersheds; the Paroo to the Warrego 1999.
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A note about pagination and chapter identification

Page numbers in this book do not run consecutively across chapters. Instead, page numbering restarts on the first page of each chapter and is prefaced by the chapter number. Thus 01.1 is chapter 1, page 1; 01.2 is chapter 1, page 2; 02.1 is chapter 2, page 1; 02.2 is chapter 2, page 2; and so on.

In the Table of Contents, each chapter is listed with its chapter number (01, 02, 03, etc.) only.

This system, in which page numbering is self-contained within each chapter, allows the publisher, Monash University ePress, to publish individual chapters online.

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We also wish to thank Bain Attwood, Marie Pernat, Jo Bramble, James Cannon, Sarah Cannon, Kathy Lothian and Joanne Mullins for the work they did to ensure the publication of the new edition of this book.

PREFACE TO THE ELECTRONIC EDITION

We are delighted that Monash University ePress is republishing *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* as a print and an e-book. Electronic publication will enable it to reach a larger audience. We are grateful to Monash Publications in History for publishing the book in the first place. Since that time, it has reached a diverse audience. This is so, we think, because there are few books quite like this one. There are many guides to writing history essays and theses, and to writing particular kinds of history—family, local, church, and company history, to mention those most likely to attract writing guides—but there are few that aim to assist in the writing of general and academic histories. We hope this republication assists a new generation of budding historians to participate in the adventure of mind and imagination that is the writing of history.

We have updated the reading guide and bibliography to include material published since the book's first edition. In Australia and internationally, the discipline has undergone many significant changes since 2000, including the 'history wars', the debates around history and fiction prompted by Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, and the moves towards transnational history. The reading guide now includes some of the main texts from these developments. It also has several books that have appeared since their authors reflected in this volume on the writing challenges they presented.

Finally, we note with great sadness the passing of one of our contributors, Greg Dening, in 2008. Greg had a long and distinguished career as an historian of international reputation, but we knew him mainly towards the end of his career, when he conducted many workshops for PhD students at the Australian National University and elsewhere. He inspired his students, and indeed his peers, to have faith in their projects, believe in the value of history generally, realise that historical writing is always a performance, and aim high in their writing. We dedicate this electronic edition of *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* to him.

Ann Curthoys
Sydney, February 2009

Ann McGrath
Canberra, February 2009

HOW TO WORKSHOP YOUR WRITING

Ann Curthoys
Ann McGrath

A writing workshop is an intensive small discussion group designed to provide an instant readership and supportive environment for improving your writing. The work in progress is distributed beforehand to all members of the group, or perhaps read out to the group (sometimes both), and then discussed. The group members respond to the piece of writing, saying what works, and making suggestions for improvement. Such workshops are common-place for fiction writers, especially in writing courses run by colleges, universities and other educational organisations. Writing groups are, in fact, everywhere.

Playwrights must workshop; it's integral to the craft of writing plays. Workshopping will make their play work, so they value it. They admit to the dangers of it causing crushed egos and over-indulgence in drink. Playwrights must have actors 'read' to check the sound and veracity of dialogue. Before a character can speak, they must stage-test to ensure they have inserted an instruction such as 'Enter stage' and have organised the entrances to avoid a collision with another actor entering simultaneously. The instruction 'Go through door' is only appropriate if the set designers are instructed to provide a door. Actors will refuse to say certain lines if they can't make sense of them. And that's all before the director comes on the scene to worry about the finer points of dramatic intensity, highs and lows, and the complex mix of music, sound effects, good casting and possibly consulting with the writer to alter the script.

In contrast, many people who write history have never really had their writing workshopped or openly discussed in a small group context. History writers will deliver a conference or a seminar paper, but that is more to get some useful feedback on its content rather than its style. In Australia, a conference or seminar paper in History is usually an oral delivery; rarely is a full written paper distributed. The audience may engage, they may come up with some stimulating new directions or useful critiques, but no one really mentions style. 'Wouldn't it be better to start in the middle and emphasise the first point and leave out that long quote?' 'Five minutes into the paper your expression was really vague.' Nobody would make such comments and, anyway, the spoken paper may differ completely from the longer chapter or other finished work. Many will also circulate their writing piece to their spouse and a colleague or two in a similar field—if there is such a person nearby—but, once again, feedback is more likely to be about content than style. Postgraduate students rely on their supervisor, usually a lone individual

with a particular take on writing. Rather than wide audience satisfaction or appeal, the supervisor's priorities are what the examiners might think and whether the overall argument is coherent. History students and, for that matter, most other writers of history, write alone, then send off their product to a 'marker', journal editor or book publisher. The mechanics of writing—of structure and style—are thought to be either less important or already learnt somewhere else. Consequently there is no forum in which the writing itself can be beaten into shape.

All this is a great shame. Workshopping really works. Our own experience of workshopping with draft chapters of theses by postgraduate students was exhilarating. Workshopping can really improve your writing, provide a deadline, and be stimulating and enjoyable. Our students complained they wanted more of it—more sessions, longer sessions, more hours.

If you are not a teacher setting up a student group, we would recommend you take the drag-net approach, and invite any group of writing people you know to start a writing group. Any size will do, but we would suggest three as a minimum, and a maximum of eight. This might be a group of fellow students, fellow historians, or a mixed bunch of writers in various non-academic fields. Our workshop group included people from very diverse backgrounds and walks of life, as well as different academic disciplines. Although they were all postgraduates, participants included a retired policeman, a park ranger, an ex-filmmaker, an art historian and practising photographer, an architect who'd turned postmodernist poet, and the list went on. Admittedly there was a slightly disproportionate representation of projects on adventurous mountain-climbing women, but no two of the students were writing on the same subject. Everyone was able to train their minds to take some different directions and approaches, so they easily engaged in very disparate topics and writing styles. Our workshop participants had in common the writing of their postgraduate theses, but we were encouraging them to go against the grain. They were urged to break out, write creatively, and consider a wider, popular audience for their writing. Like many writers, they also shared the virtue of being good readers, and they read the other participants' work carefully indeed. More heads together means more ideas, and a truer sense of a real audience response.

We broke the group of twelve into two groups of six, and each was joined by at least one more senior person. But the workshops would have worked equally well if they were entirely student-run. The workshop could be chaired by anyone in the group and two longish papers can be discussed in a two to three hour meeting. You'd probably schedule a tea-break for the longer time slot. Participants read the papers in advance. Most of the

papers were about 8000 words so they required an hour and a half each to discuss in detail. All kinds of issues were discussed.

You do need some ground rules. Our main rules were that it was important to say what we liked about a paper, and that any criticisms had to be constructive, in the form of suggestions for change. We used the format of going around the group in turn, so that each participant made comments. The whole group joined in to discuss them, to agree or disagree. 'I liked this bit.' 'This was funny.' 'This was clever.' 'That was moving.' Conversations about what was worthwhile were followed by the critique of aspects thought *not* to work so well, whether these be stylistic or conceptual. The writer was part of the workshop group and free to join in, stay quiet, or defend her or his work. Most were thrilled with the interest taken in their writing and very appreciative of input. Before the workshop phase, leaders might consider ways of encouraging students to work together in group discussions or get used to each other on an excursion or at a social gathering. Mutual trust is also engendered by the group leaders relating stories of their own writing experiences, or by reading out selections from their own work in progress or other recent work. Such sharing creates a mood for a mutually supportive atmosphere. But let's be honest, the first time your work is workshopped can be somewhat intimidating. On the other hand, it is an equitable arrangement, with all workshop members having turns at being critic and being critiqued. A helpful, respectful attitude ideally emerges, although there'd be the inevitable personality clash which might require mediating, or a dominating talker who might need to be told to queue for his or her next turn. One or two participants might get edgy and feel they have to justify their work at any cost. This is natural enough, for who hasn't felt insecure about their writing? Yet often the criticisms which surprise or upset us most are the useful ones. We only realise this with more distance. The reader is your audience, and if they don't clap much, you might as well know why. Most participants, however, will see the virtue of the suggestions they receive. Group members seem to really engage with and enjoy reading other writers' work and this gives them more confidence about self-editing and critique. Given their lack of experience in workshopping, the incisive and useful critiques and suggestions offered by postgraduates of their peers surprised us. Yet perhaps the high quality should be expected, for students have been trained to be good readers and critics, and have acquired many skills of their own making. The wonderful talent pool of potential peer-critics out there, with their strong conceptual skills, eyes for good writing and fresh ideas, are a wonderful resource that should not be wasted.

An audience, and an engaged, interactive audience of fellow readers and writers, can help you extend your own creativity. They can show you how to take a path that leads

you further towards your chosen direction. They can show you how to make your work more effective, more memorable and inspiring.

It's great to learn from each other, and it provides a terrific ongoing support network from people who inevitably suffer similar kinds of writerly highs and lows. It extends the input, ideas and skills that will show in the final product. It will extend your range of lunch partners. Yes, the lonely writer gets to enjoy the company of fellow humans, plus gains an excellent excuse to phone that new friend. The recommended line is in plain language which cuts straight to the point: 'Want to start a writing workshop?'

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At the time of his death in 2008, Greg Dening was Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Melbourne and Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University.