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Writing Fiction as Practice-based Research

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This paper examines the value of Practice-based Research in writing fiction. Central to this inquiry is the question: What methodologies are available to writers of fiction? The context of this question arises from the creative practices involved in researching and writing, from idea to finished artefact, a published collection of short fiction stories. The artefact in this case is 'Good Night Papa: Short Stories from Japan and Elsewhere (Rowe 2017), the significance of which is twofold: it represents the fictionalising of the writer's 'lived experience' as a mode of storytelling, and demonstrates how research methodologies are used to achieve a finished text. The outcome of this inquiry reveals the benefits of such a methodology to writers, educators, students of writing, and anyone who values storytelling.

For writers of fiction, a methodology ensures that the creative process is structured. Whilst it can be a 'liberating way of organising thoughts and materials' (Beasley 2010), a methodology does not necessarily guarantee the smooth, comprehensive, or punctual completion of a writing project. It does, however, minimise time-wasting and ensure that the journey from idea to finished artefact is easily followed.

So, what methodologies are available to writers in their research and writing processes? This paper seeks to answer the question by drawing on a published collection of short stories, entitled *Good Night Papa: Short Stories from Japan and Elsewhere* (Rowe, 2017), to show

methodologies used to create a series of fictional narratives. Further questions relevant to this inquiry are: How do writers generate ideas? What research processes are used to produce short fiction? How does a writer benefit from these processes? Additionally, what are the building blocks of a narrative, and by what methods do writers authenticate their stories so as to create a sense of 'being there' in the reader's mind? This paper cites examples from two stories in the writer's collection, "The Hunting Party" and "The Girl Who Made the Kung Fu Master Cry", to demonstrate how an idea becomes a story.

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define Practice-led Research and its role in shaping a methodology for writing fiction. Linda Candy (2006) in her *Practice Based Research: A Guide,* terms it an "original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice" (p. 2). This inquiry shows how Practice-based Research, as a method of investigation, can lead writers to not only gain 'new knowledge' of their work, but to also find deeper meaning in their own 'lived experiences'.

Generating ideas

Not unlike Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu's "journey of a thousand miles", the writer must also begin with a first step: an idea. Nicola Boyd's Strange Loops theory (Boyd, 2009) suggests that by starting with a broad idea, and through a spiralling process of personal experience, reading, writing and critical thought, the writer can move towards a single idea to create a story. Popular themes (love, loss, triumph, revenge, family), lived experiences (or the lived experiences of others), news events, diary or journal entries, overheard conversations, even rumours and gossip, all provide the kernel of ideas for stories. However, an idea remains an abstract concept until it is 'fleshed out', or expanded upon. This gives us the building blocks of a narrative, such as characters, plot, setting, and genre, and is achieved through brainstorming, creating 'mind maps',

drawing storyboards, or simply recording thoughts as they come to mind.

The short story, “The Hunting Party” (Rowe, 2017), is a tale of three Australian cattle station hands who are entrusted with guiding an American journalist on an outback expedition to shoot a rogue bullock. The story idea and the motivation behind its telling arose from a pressing need to ‘try something different’ (Beasley, 2010), in this case, by fictionalising the ‘lived’ experience of a trip to the remote East Kimberley region of Western Australia. Although additional research and reflection brought a deeper understanding of this experience, the intentions behind this writing project still needed to be confirmed:

> Q1. Why short fiction?
> A. Because the short story form is best suited to a moment-in-time scenario. In other words, the text itself is part of a greater story; it is the ‘tip of the iceberg’ where the narrative’s eventual outcome is left ultimately to the reader’s imagination (Hemingway, as cited in Beasley, 2010).
>
> Q2. What kind of story?
> A story about the interaction of men with their environment, and also about how differences in cultural thinking—and cultural ignorance—shape people’s perceptions.
>
> Q3. Why Western Australia?
> The outback landscape, and the people who choose to live in it, offer an intriguing contrast to the vast urban sprawls of Australia’s southeastern seaboard. Themes of town versus country, nature’s beauty and nature’s wrath, cultural differences, and violence, are easily invoked.

TABLE 1
Building Blocks of a Narrative

Possible story titles:	"Three Bullets", "The Hunting Party"
Genre:	Short story, adventure, dark comedy
Audience:	English language readers aged 16+
Setting:	Cassandra Downs (a fictitious cattle station), Western Australia
Plot:	Quest/tragedy
Mood:	Menacing, beguiling, darkly humorous.
Characters:	Dusko (station chopper pilot) Knackers (station grader driver) Red (station hand) Mike Horowitz, (American photojournalist)
Themes/messages:	Loyalty, mateship, city vs country, cultural differences, nature endures, nature as an omnipotent force, cultural ignorance has disastrous consequences.

The 'fleshing out' of ideas for "The Hunting Party" followed a process of freewriting (dialogue in the outback vernacular), playing with titles (for hooks, puns and thematic links), exploring themes (loyalty, mateship, violence, town versus country, fear and loathing), reading for style (the clipped vernacular of Australian writer, Henry Lawson's stories), viewing websites on various arcane topics (to authenticate details about

bush mechanics, cattle musters, firearm safety, livestock breeds), and reviewing field notes from a visit to a 42,000 sq. km cattle station in Western Australia's East Kimberley region (to establish atmosphere). Then, using a 'stream of thought' (Rainer, 1978), the narrative building blocks for "The Hunting Party" emerged as presented in Table 1.

Theoretical perspectives

In writing "The Hunting Party," two theoretical approaches determined ways of making the story meaningful to a wider readership: an ethnographic perspective, where the writer draws on descriptions of people, their culture, customs, habits and rituals to give an 'insider's point of view' (Hoey, 2018); and an autoethnographic perspective, which analyses the personal experience of the 'insider' in order to better understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

Thus, by reflecting on the 'lived experience' in outback Australia, meanings previously overlooked emerged; for example: the hardship faced by people who live in the Australian outback, the effects of weather (extreme heat), distance, and isolation. Self-reflection and a search for 'deeper meaning', however, are far from easy; the writer concurs with Kolodny (2000), who says, "It was new and it was hard and I had to go through something to get the end result" (p. 136). For writers using real or personal events as the basis for their fiction, this process of reflection can offer therapeutic value in that it is possible to make sense of ourselves (Kiesinger, 2002) and "unpick hidden meanings" (Whitting, 2010, p. 23). Put simply, theoretical perspectives can serve a dual purpose to the writer—as an emotional pressure valve and as a source of data.

Creating realism

Achieving authenticity in a story can require time, money and effort. Tolstoy no doubt understood this; to write *War and Peace* he acquired original letters from Napoleon and the Russian generals, visited the 1812 battle grounds with a compass and maps, and drew on his first-hand experience of fighting in the Crimean War (Bartlett, 2016). Similarly, Charles Frazier, the author of the prize-winning novel *Cold*

Mountain, spent several years studying ‘plant lore’ of the southern Appalachian Mountains to acquire the botanical details for his Odyssey-styled narrative set during the American Civil War.

So, how does a writer convey the discomfort of 45-degree Celsius heat in the Australian outback, the smell of bull dust, roadkill, cordite, tobacco, blood, grease and diesel, or the majesty of sunset over escarpment country in the Australian outback, to a reader who has never visited the Australian outback? Journal notes and photos contain impressions, ideas, recorded sights, sounds, moods, smells, and other raw ‘data’ which, although meaningful only to writer-researcher (Bourke & Neilsen, 2004), can be used to effectively tap into a reader's senses and their own knowledge and/or personal experience (Barthes, 1967).

It is possible for writers to create settings they are unfamiliar with, and still imbue their stories with a sense of ‘being there.’ This might be achieved by viewing films like *The Proposition* (2005), *Mad Max* (1979), *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994), *The Rover* (2014), and *Wake in Fright* (1971), which communicate to the viewer the sensations of isolation, hardship, heat and desperation, often found in the outback. Similarly, from short stories and novels such as Henry Lawson’s “The Union Buries Its Dead” (1893), Donald Stewart’s “The Driven” (1961), Kenneth Cook’s “Wake in Fright” (1967) and Tim Winton’s “Dirt Music” (2001), the writer can reach other conclusions: that life in the Australian outback, while hard, hot and desperate, is also calm and breathtakingly picturesque. An excerpt from the Rowe’s (2013) “The Hunting Party” illustrates this point:

> The bull buggy rolled on through the heat and the men were silent. The American tucked his notebook and camera away and for a while let the landscape beguile him with its curious colours and mysterious flora. Boab trees studded the roadside—dark, bloated sentinels from Africa, lost to the continental drift. On the roadside up ahead, a large bird rose into the air (p. 67)

A research methodology does not have to be tedious or menial. Andrew (2012, p.17) reminds us that "lining up your data in new ways" can simplify and even enliven the process. For "The Hunting Party," this author took ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches to:

i) recording sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations
ii) conducting interviews with local people
iii) reflecting on personal field notes and journal entries

Writing processes:

There are many writers who are familiar with the notion that it is better to "write what you know" (Carver, n.d.). On the other hand, Kazuo Ishiguro said, "'Write about what you know' is the most stupid thing I've heard. It encourages people to write a dull autobiography. It's the reverse of firing the imagination and potential of writers" (Ishiguro, 2015). 'Write what you know' served as the primary motivation for the *Good Night Papa* short fiction project, for two reasons: i) research needs were largely satisfied, and ii) writing from the 'lived' experience offered a far easier route to creating authentic characters, mood, atmosphere and setting.

"The Girl Who Made The Kung Fu Master Cry" (Rowe, 2013), the second story in the *Good Night Papa* collection, tells the tale of a Chinese kung fu master who discovers a way to channel the creative energies of a recalcitrant foreign student at his school. The idea for this story grew out of a newspaper feature story, researched and written by the writer in 2007. Turning fact into fiction presented a logical and interesting writing challenge. It required reflecting on field notes taken years earlier, placing an autoethnographic lens over their meanings to determine new ways to present setting, mood and characters, and also ways in which these characters would behave, speak, and eventually, how they would resolve the conflict around which the story turns. The research methodology used consisted of a three-pronged approach to similar to that used in writing "The Hunting Party":

i) identify themes and relevant data for creating characters
ii) research plot types
iii) plan the writing process

"The Girl Who Made the Kung Fu Master Cry" is based on a 'lived experience.' In 2007, the writer spent time researching the martial art of kung fu in the town of Dengfeng, Henan province, home to the world famous Shaolin Temple. First-hand experiences of training at the Songshan Academy of Sports, under the tutelage of a ninth-level ranked Shaolin monk, enabled the writer to authenticate this short story with sights, sounds and smells of a real kung fu school.

The use of themes in fiction, and the ways in which they are expressed, can be appreciated in the short stories of John Steinbeck, Roald Dahl, Flannery O'Connor, Anton Chekhov, Aldous Huxley, Joseph Conrad. The strong humanistic themes permeating stories such as naivete in Dahl's "Pig," betrayal in Huxley's "The Gioconda Smile," or ignorance in O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" also informed the writing processes of "The Girl Who Made The Kung Fu Master Cry." While kung fu is the overall theme of this story, it is dealt with in a unique way; rather than show its value in a physical sense, the writer has sought to show how kung fu, as a philosophy of perfection through perseverance, may be applied to everyday life. Conflict is the second theme of the story; two people of completely different temperaments and background are thrust together and must resolve their differences to achieve harmony. Tragedy is the third theme, and within this is contained the story's vital ingredient, irony.

Character development

The narrative's main protagonist, Master Wu Xaiobo, is based on the real life kung fu teacher, Master Shidecheng. He is short, shaven-headed, round-faced and physically trim. The antagonist, Ariel Bini, is daughter of Wu's first foreign student, now a successful seafood salesman in Paris. Creating her character was simply a matter of juxtaposing qualities.

In the 1990 French language film, *La Femme Nikita* by Luc Besson, a female criminal is recruited by the French government to work as an assassin. Just as Australian films informed "The Hunting Party", the depiction of Nikita's character offered useful traits—prickly, independent, tough-talking—for creating the short story's headstrong antagonist, Ariel.

TABLE 2
Characteristics of protagonists

Master Wu	**Ariel**
Male	Female
Mid-40s	Mid-20s
Chinese	French
Eastern	Western
Buddhist/Confucian	Christian
Martial artist	Fine artist
Shaven head	Orange dreadlocks

Plot types:

Novice writers may find it useful to know that there are patterns of story which help shape a narrative. Christopher Booker (2006) outlines some of the most recognisable in his *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. These patterns are:

- Overcoming the Monster.
- Rags to Riches.
- The Quest.
- Voyage and Return.

- Comedy.
- Tragedy.
- Rebirth.

"The Girl Who Made The Kung Fu Master Cry" borrows from Ronald B. Tobias' (1993) *20 Master Plots And How To Build Them,* and uses elements of his "Discovery" plot structure to convey a tale of two characters who differ in almost every way, and yet are drawn together by circumstance and self-discovery. Students may recognise this story type which is usually told over longer, novel-length works. The challenge with writing short fiction lies in using language simply, sparingly, and in a compact form, to tell a story.

CONCLUSION

Without original ideas and methods to shape them, writers will find it difficult to produce meaningful narratives. The Practice-based Research Methodology, as shown, provides a sound framework for transforming ideas into finished stories. This is achieved through brainstorming, gathering, evaluating and reflecting on data, building realistic characters and authentic settings, and giving consideration to themes, messages and plot types.

Candy's definition (2006) of Practice-based Research as an inquiry which seeks new knowledge through practice and the outcomes of that practice hints at the possibility that writers grow knowledge, understanding and skill in their craft as they perform it. The two short stories used to illustrate the writer's choice and use of methodology demonstrate that Practice-based Research, as a method of investigation, leads not only to "new knowledge" being created, but also to the discovery of deeper meaning within the writer's 'lived experiences' as they write about it.

With regard to outcomes, this remains an area for further research, mainly because readers read from their own perspectives (based on their personal experience, knowledge, biases etc.). That the intended

meaning of a text may differ from that of the reader's meaning is not necessarily a negative thing, since alternative insights and interpretations of a writer's text will help them to see new possibilities and scope for their writing in the future.

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