Vanishing

A novel

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by

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is a novel titled *Vanishing*. It is a work of speculative fiction set in Western Australia. The setting is contemporary, although in a departure from history, the state of Western Australia has seceded from Australia and exists as an independent nation. The government has evolved into a liberal model of tolerance and invited the maligned races of folklore to immigrate. To the world's astonishment, the Snitches emerge from the wilderness and settle in their new homeland. Their unique mind-reading powers are pressed into service as the government strives to eradicate offensive speech and offensive thought. The novel's protagonist is Hunter Jones, an average guy with an irreverent attitude towards the government's social engineering agenda. His ordinary life is rocked when twin brother Sean is abducted after a night out with their parents. Hunter's search for his missing brother is stymied by the loss of anything to do with Sean—personal effects go missing and memories are erased. The unbreakable bond shared by twins means that Hunter is the only person who remembers Sean ever existed.

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The premise of speculative fiction is to ask "What if…?" by creating alternative scenarios of human society. This form of fiction can be used, as Margaret Atwood has done, to warn humanity of potential problems to come. While I consider speculative fiction as distinct from science fiction, the genres are closely related and the boundaries between them are often blurred. To set science fiction apart from other genres of fiction, Darko Suvin developed his seminal theory of cognitive estrangement; however, far from establishing itself as unique to science fiction, my thesis novel, *Vanishing*, demonstrates that Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement can be of equal consequence to works from the speculative-fiction genre as well.

Vanishing is urban frontier fiction and set in a fictionalised version of Perth, the capital of Western Australia. In 1933, Western Australia voted in favour of seceding from the Federation of Australia, although the secession was ultimately rejected by the United Kingdom House of Commons. In *Vanishing* I posit the premise that the Western Australian secession actually occurred, and the state became an independent country. *Vanishing* opens in contemporary times, when Western Australia's nationalist government has evolved into a liberal model of tolerance and opened the country's borders to marginalised nonhuman races. The Snitches arrive first, and the government uses their mind-reading abilities to police thoughts deemed to be racist, sexist, homophobic or simply intolerant.

While I catalogue *Vanishing* as speculative fiction, others might argue a novel based on an alternate reality is science fiction. This latter genre has a long tradition in literature; however, debate still rages about what science fiction is and what it isn't. Carl Freedman concedes that science fiction is sometimes understood in light of the American pulp tradition birthed by the *Amazing Stories* magazine in 1926 (14). The narrative focus of such low-brow stories might be along the lines of space travel, intergalactic wars or trumpet-eared Martians. As Freedman points out, adopting this narrow definition would be problematic because it excludes the works of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Ray Bradbury and other authors of literary science fiction. It would also exclude *Vanishing,* as the novel contains none of the tropes popularised in pulp fiction.

At the academic end of the definitional spectrum, Suvin defines science fiction as a "literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7-8). In other words, what we are familiar with in our ordinary reality is rendered unfamiliar, or made strange, in the fictional reality. Suvin defines any such destabilising feature a novum (63). In Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, a geopolitical novum is evident with a quasi-military fundamentalist theocracy in control of the United States. What we know about the freedoms afforded by the world's most developed democracy is estranged by the actions of a repressive Western government that brutalises the rights of women. Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Vanishing* also deploys a geopolitical novum. What is a federated state in our present reality operates as an independent nation in the imaginative framework of the novel. Other estranging elements are a humanitarian refugee programme that focusses on nonhumans, and a regional subset

of Australian society, long an irreverent domain of free speech, that becomes a bastion of political correctness. Since both novels meet the conditions of cognitive estrangement, it appears that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vanishing* are works of science fiction. However, like Atwood, I disagree and argue that they are both speculative fiction.

The use of the term "speculative fiction" is a recent phenomenon and, like science fiction, has been defined in different ways. M. Keith Booker argues that the collective works of science fiction, fantasy and horror all constitute speculative fiction (xiv). On the other hand, Ursula Le Guin dismisses speculative fiction as just another name for science fiction (qtd. In Atwood 5-6). However, Atwood believes speculative fiction is a genre distinct from science fiction with clear boundaries: the depiction of "human society and its possible future forms, which are either much better than we have now or much worse" (115). Atwood further defines speculative fiction as "what could happen but hadn't when the author wrote the book" (6). Given Atwood's focus is on human society, her definition appears to corral future-minded utopian and dystopian fiction together, although I would broaden it to also include past human society as well.

Atwood demands the tag of speculative fiction, and not science fiction, for her dystopic novels, referring to science fiction as the domain of "talking squids in outer space" (qtd. in Cain). Notwithstanding Atwood's disdain, the two genres share a close relationship through the concept of cognitive estrangement. While Suvin developed his theory to define science fiction, Freedman argues that cognitive estrangement has limited applicability for science fiction; it ostracises a large number of novels, particularly those of the pulp tradition, because they lack novums (17-19). On the contrary, I postulate that defamiliarising the familiar is the core device of speculative fiction. For instance, in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, the novum is the use of clones as a source of organ transplants; in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road,* the Earth's landscape is rendered strange; and in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, there is a paranoid attitude towards literature.

In *Vanishing*, I speculate on an alternate society, one closely mirroring our own, where the state acts to censor not only what people say, but what they think as well. Speech arises from thoughts, and so the state believes that offensive material on both counts should be prosecuted.

Vanishing introduces a race of nonhumans called Snitches. As mind-reading spell-casting immigrants, the Snitches are a second form of novum in the thesis. While the Snitches have a fantastical origin, the settling of refugees in Australia is a contemporary and real political issue. Often seen as defenceless victims, I estranged the refugee stereotype by bestowing the Snitches with special abilities, making them more powerful than their human benefactors, and settling them into the community. In the first draft, the Snitches were named witches; however, critiques identified a problem. Due to the fairy tale association, readers inferred capabilities to my race of witches that weren't present in the text. This had the effect of dispelling suspension of disbelief. I renamed them to Snitches, which keeps a rhyming association and also alludes to their mind-reading ability, so to remove the unconscious association and the expectations that came with it. Now I have freedom to develop the Snitches in any way I see fit.

The novel's protagonist is Hunter Jones, a 26 year-old working-class guy with a self-destructive approach to life that brings him into conflict with the progressive cultural

reforms. Hunter is searching for his twin brother, Sean, who goes missing after a night out on the town. What makes Sean's disappearance incredibly strange is that all traces of him have been erased as well—memories, administrative records and personal effects. Hunter's antagonist is Hella, a newly-arrived Snitch, who has information about Sean's mysterious disappearance. Ostracised by her own kind, Hella seeks to assimilate into human society and is intent on using her knowledge of Sean's disappearance to her own advantage. Minor characters include Hunter's parents, Peter and Fran, both actively concerned for Hunter's psychological welfare, and Frank, a paranormal investigator.

I chose the Western Australian setting for a number of reasons. It is my home state, and I'm familiar with its history, culture and geography. Perth is the world's most isolated city. Western Australia is the world's second-largest country subdivision, and with 77% of its population living in the capital city, the vast area of the arid desert state is mostly unoccupied. For those, such as the Snitches' coven in my novel, who seek to exploit a large population disconnected from the rest of the world, Perth is the ideal place. Being a resource-rich state, WA's economy is mining based with a working-class culture. The anecdotal social norms are hard work, heavy drinking, smoking, gambling, a love of sports and a fierce penchant for freedom of expression even if others find it offensive. As such it is the ideal stage for a conflict between a wild-west lifestyle and a wave of government-administered paternalism. For example, a furore erupted in Perth last year when the WA Opera cancelled a performance of *Carmen,* a globally-recognised opera, because Healthway, the sponsoring government agency, felt that *Carmen's* 19th century tobacco-factory setting glamorised smoking. While the Western Australian Premier and the Australian Prime-Minister immediately criticised Healthway and threatened more ministerial involvement in the agency's operations, the case is suggestive of how governments could become hypersensitive to societal influences.

In terms of writing craft, I explore a frequently-discussed aspect, the show versus tell dichotomy. According to Jerome Stern, the principle of *show don't tell* bears truth with the reader more likely to find a character believable if their traits, emotions and qualities are shown in dramatic manner as opposed to the reader being told that the character is happy or sad (218). To skew the balance in favour of showing over telling, I use an objective third-person narrator who "describes what is externally observable and deducible" (Stern 161). The narrator cannot access the character's internal world and can only describe what is seen or heard, not what is thought or felt. Without the benefit of an internal monologue, the reader is completely dependent on the narrator's depiction of a character's behaviours in order to deduce thoughts and feelings. In other words, I make my narrator show by removing the opportunity to tell. This approach is evident in Cormac McCarthy's writing.

With a mind to writing a novel that is rich in conflict, I explore the use of multiple plot lines and couple the main plot with secondary plots or subplots. Conflict, a core literary device to spark and retain reader interest, is described by Adam Sexton as "frustrated dramatic need" (4). Douglas Glover defines conflict as any relationship of opposition, typically but not always represented as characters in opposition, that is, A versus B (24). The purpose of multiple plot lines is twofold: firstly, challenge the characters with several fronts of conflict to test their mettle; and secondly, establish multiple courses of dramatic narrative, varying in intensity, by which to engage the reader. The main plot is Hunter's search for his missing brother. The subplots are: Hunter's struggle to keep his job, Hella's vengeful pursuit and Frank's hidden agenda.

Writing my thesis has been a fantastic learning exercise. Through my research, I've learned a tremendous amount about the speculative fiction and science fiction genres, knowledge invaluable to my thesis and for my future writing projects. On the technical front, writing with a third-party objective narrator has ingrained a discipline to push deep into my characters to understand how they will behave in a given situation and the nuances on offer with different feelings and emotions. This might not have been possible without throwing away the narrative crutch that is called "telling."

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TABLE OF CONTENTS