

University of Wollongong

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Cubicles

Abstract:

This creative work explores the relationship between narrative form and sexuality. It presents a dual narrative: one which uses proper nouns and dialogue and another which eschews both of these devices. Through this creative exploration, it asks: what are the narrative and formal implications of writing about heterosexual and homosexual 'courtship'? Which narrative form is the more limiting for characters' agency?

Biographical note:

Dr Joshua Lobb is a Lecturer in Creative Writing in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong. Scholarly publications and papers include: "Travelling Partners: Using Literary Studies to Support Creative Writing about Real Spaces" (AAWP 2010), "I could just walk out of this inconvenient story": Narrative Possibility in the Fairy Tales of A. S. Byatt' (UEA 2009), 'Degrees of Relation': Iris Murdoch and A. S. Byatt' (ibidem-Verlag, 2009); 'Deferring the 'Main' Point: Teaching 'Narrative Desire' as an Alternative Creative Practice' (AAWP 2009); and 'But if the author is dead, what are we doing here?': Teaching Critical Theory in a Creative Writing Program' (AAWP 2008). His creative work includes the plays *Wilde Tales* and *Still at Aulis*, and the short story 'I forgot my programme so I went to get it back' (Bridport Prize runner-up 2009, *Best Australian Stories 2010*).

Keywords:

narrative – prose – sexuality

He's looking through a hole into the eye of another body. It's a hole that's been scratched into the wall of the cubicle. The eye is yellowy round the edges, but urgently blue in the middle. Then it's gone, and is replaced with a sliding, gripping hand. The eye returns. Around the hole is a series of texted drawings, a line of numbers, a set of instructions. A kind of narrative. He's been reading it all day. The narrative is remarkably detailed: it recounts an unexpected encounter in this very cubicle. He admires the penmanship: the thin lines of text are barely smudged, the strokes are even. The writing gets tinier and tinier as the narrative advances.

He can hear more narratives coming over the cubicle walls.

Cindy says: 'I'm having the best time. It's really awesome how much I can freak him out with my bridezilla demands. Last night over dinner I told him that I wanted seventeen tiers on the cake and a swing band and all twelve of my cousins in peach and a chocolate fountain and invitations to every single girl I went to high-school with and twenty-eight different kinds of vol-au-vents. His face turned so white. 'And that's the colour of the dress I want,' I said.'

'Have you managed to find the fabric?' asks Rachel, clacketing away at her keyboard.

'I was looking at this sort of shade of ivory, or maybe pearl. But it's a bit sheeny. And then I saw this new colour—oh, what's it called?—in duchess satin. I've ruled out organza. I just don't want it to be too white, you know? I don't think white's right for me.'

There's a stifled guffaw from Ed's cubicle. 'It's definitely not right for you,' he sniggers.

'I heard that,' says Cindy.

'I never said a word,' says Ed.

His gaze slides down the wall to the space below. There's a thin gap between the cubicle wall and the floor: a thick band of air. He sees the air being pierced by a shoe. Slightly ratty white leather. White knotted laces. He watches. The shoe taps. The shoe disappears. He sees four fingers curling round the rim of the cubicle wall: very slowly, very tentatively. Then they whip back. They curl in again. Square-tipped, tightly-clipped nails. He gauges the fingers on his own hand: crumpled knuckles, black spiky hairs, milky nails. The fingers are still gripping. He wonders if he should touch them. Then the fingers flick themselves back into the other cubicle. It's an offer, a gesture towards. He looks back through the scratched-out hole. The yellowy-blue eye is even more urgent. The fingers flick again.

‘Well, the first part of the date went badly,’ Ed confesses. ‘I’m explaining about the fucking trackwork and she said something like ‘I like a man who knows the value of punctuality.’’

‘Stuck-up tart,’ says Cindy.

Rachel asks: ‘Where did you end up meeting?’

‘Slip Inn.’

‘Isn’t that where—?’

‘Yep. So I’m already on the back foot and I have to really put the charm on. I’m giving her compliments about her hair and her beautiful eyes. She’s a stunner. Even better than her profile pic. She’s a bit hot and cold, though. I’m not sure if the charm is working. She doesn’t want to tell me much about herself, but she asks a lot of questions about me. She makes a really nasty comment about my choice of jacket. And I love that jacket. But she laughs at my jokes so that’s something.’

‘You make jokes?’ says Rachel.

‘Chuck us over a post-it, will you?’ says Cindy.

‘So after a cocktail or five, we’re out on the street. Plenty of cabs whizzing past but none stopping for us. I’m not sure if I should be putting on the hard word here or if she wants me to be gentlemanly so I’m keeping my distance. It’s fucking cold this time of year and she’s only wearing one of those short sparkly dresses. So I opt for the ‘hey, do you want my jacket?’ approach. She snorts at the jacket, but she takes it anyway. ‘What does that mean?’ I’m thinking. Eventually a cab screeches up but I still don’t know what she thinking. She slides over to the far side of the cab seat. I’ve got one foot in the gutter. ‘Get in, you idiot,’ she’s saying to me. ‘You don’t want to be late for this as well, do you?’’

There’s a moment, as he moves between cubicles, when he catches himself in the scratched mirror. It’s like the air has stiffened. The taps have been caught mid-drip. It’s like everything in the room has been snap-frozen. The fluorescent light has stopped flickering. It’s like a question’s been asked and the room’s waiting for the answer.

‘I’m so over it,’ Rachel says. ‘Of an evening, all I want is to relax. Put my feet up on the couch. Watch *Desperate Housewives*. You should have heard what Gabby said this week. But Tony’s got other ideas. He just can’t get enough of *Jeopardy*. I don’t know why I agreed to move in with him. He’s got the worst taste. Game shows. I mean, if I wanted to know which city hosted the 1960 Olympics, I’d have become a bloody athlete. He actually tapes the episodes to the hard drive, goddammit. And he sits there, stuffing himself with chips and spraying the answers at the television.’

‘Hot,’ says Cindy.

‘It’s like a sickness. ‘Where is Niagara Falls?’ ‘What is *Pride & Prejudice*?’ And the worst thing of all is that when it’s time to watch *my* show, Tony won’t have a bar of it. He stands by the door in his moth-eaten pyjamas, whispering sweet nothings, trying to lure me into bed. I’ve had it up to here.’

Ed says: ‘Oh, poor you. All that available sex must be so hard to resist.’

‘I know, I know. What’s a girl to do?’

The body with the urgent yellow-blue eyes and the tightly-clipped nails is covered by tracksuit fabric, slippery blue. Above the eyes is fraying dark hair. There’s a row of bolts along the top of the cubicle wall: this haloes around the hair. He can see the other side of the scratched-out hole. There’s very little room in here. A cistern, a plastic toilet-paper holder, two bodies. He’s backed against the chipboard door. The tracksuited body is facing him. The top half of the slippery blue is unzipped. The lower half of the fabric slithers to the floor. It wedges forward. He’s pushed downward, towards the now exposed black-haired stomach. The hairs curl. The body rocks back and forth. He grips the black-haired thighs. His hands are dragged up to the body’s buttocks. He finds himself toppling backward. He has to let go of one of the buttocks and steady himself. His fingers touch the row of bolts that run along the bottom of the cubicle walls. His shoulder bumps the toilet-paper holder. The urgent body grinds. He takes it all in.

Cindy says: ‘When I was little I used to dream about four white ponies with white bridles, pulling a carriage shaped like swan. I’m riding along inside, in a red velvet chamber. Then the carriage door opens and there he is: the man of my dreams. I know that’s just a fairy tale, but all I want is for our day to be special.’

It’s just a push against the wall of the cubicle. It’s just a grind. It’s just friction. It’s just a quick look deep into the urgent blue eyes. The eyes are looking beyond everything. He knows that they’re not looking at him, but he pretends that they are. It’s just an intake of breath.

Ed says: ‘I really like her. She’s so beautiful and she’s got this fantastic laugh. I normally try and keep things low-key at the beginning, but we really click. So I sent her a text. ‘hey babe, u want to go to movies 2nite?’ I think this is the start of something amazing. I just hope I didn’t blow it.’

The tracksuitless body, shuddering, makes a muffled groan. The body is re-covered with the slippery fabric. It shudders again. And then it’s gone.

‘What I really want to do,’ Rachel says, ‘is find a website which has all the answers to all trivia questions. And then one night he can be lying there eating chips and I can tell him all about Rembrandt and the capital of Hawaii and whatever. I’ve got to admit I find it kind of hot the way he knows all the answers. Even if he’s wearing those moth-eaten pyjamas and covered in crumbs, he’s still my man.’

The room contains the following items. Four cubicles, wooden-doored, separated by three wooden walls. Three of the four doors are open, indicating vacancy, the last from the entrance half-closed. One of the wooden walls, the wall furthest from the entrance way, has a hole, 0.75 centimetres wide, scratched into it, rough-hewn, sixty centimetres from the floor. Four plastic toilet-roll holders fastened to the three dividing cubicle walls, and one attached to the outer wall of the room. Four toilet rolls in place: one roll sixteen squares from its cardboard centre, the others more-or-less complete. Four toilets, with dual-flush systems, not exactly clean, but serviceable: a few discolorations on the cisterns. Three have been recently flushed, one contains several wads of soaking toilet paper. On the opposite wall are four matching sinks: dull-metalled, more rectangular than round. Eight taps: four cold, four hot. Five turned off tightly, so tight that the water would shriek out if you turned one of the four-pronged handles (there are 128 prongs). Two taps dripping: one at the rate of one droplet approximately every ten seconds, the other more infrequently, more irregularly. One tap allowing cold water to splash into the crumbling metal sink. Three canisters, made of opaque ribbed plastic, fixed to the wall between the sinks, a metre or so from the floor, containing a sickly-sweet pink liquid. A button to press to squirt the liquid out. Four mirrors above each sink, mostly smudged. The mirror closest the entrance way is speckled with twenty or thirty discoloured blotches: these are concentrated in the top right-hand corner, but spread across the mirror. Opposite the entrance, the wall is devoted to the urinal: glossy metal, essentially smooth, but with a few dents here and there. The trough contains one-and-a-half sickly-stinking white discs and a film of oily liquid. The floor is not clean. The black-and-white mosaic tiles are smeared primarily with muddy footprints, a few leaves around the entrance way, a few blobs of sponged toilet paper and two damp scrunched-up yellowing pieces of paper. The frame of the entrance way is made of the same material as the cool grey-stone walls. Beside the entrance way on the wall is a metal box. It has an aperture at the bottom from which protrudes a strip of yellowing paper. Below this, an inadequately-sized plastic bin, overflowing with scrunched-up yellowing paper. Above the room the once-white ceiling continues the spread of speckles from the mirror, the speckles darkening over the entrance-way door. There are two long bands of fluorescent light running perpendicular to the entrance. There are cobwebs in three of the four corners. There are six living creatures: one spider (in the corner above the cubicles), three flies (hovering around the entrance way), two humans. One stands next to the still-splashing sink; the other pressed against the furthest cubicle wall.

He releases it all. It all comes bursting out on the cubicle walls.

He says:

‘London was the host of the 1960 Olympics. The capital of Hawaii is Honolulu. Niagara Falls has a drop of 53 metres and is on the border

between the United States and Canada. It is a popular honeymoon spot, and was one of the locations of the film *Superman II*. It's where Clark and Lois first kiss. *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813 and tells of the romance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. On average, 94% of couples who meet on the internet have a second date, and 18% have relationships that last more than a year. In 2000, Mary Donaldson met Prince Frederik; in 2004 she became Mary, Crown Princess of Denmark. The number for Combined Taxis is 133 300. You want Diamond French satin.'

'Wow,' Ed says. 'You could give Tony a run for his money.'

'Will you marry me?' says Rachel.

Research statement

Research background

The work is an original short prose piece. It uses as its starting point the hypothesis that narratives surrounding gay male sexual encounters tend towards visual details, where as heterosexual narratives often depend on verbal exchanges. The research questions for the project are: what are the narrative and formal implications of writing about heterosexual and homosexual 'courtship'? Which narrative form is the more limiting for characters' agency?

Research contribution

The work is situated in the methodology of research-led practice. It is a practical application of research, combining analysis of dialogue in realism with the writing on the ideological implications of form. In particular, it draws on Ermarth's proposal that dialogue produces a 'unified field of relationships' (1983: 81), Vernon's assertion that eavesdropping is a manifestation of capitalist (heteronormative) discourse (1984: 87) and Pearce and Owens' examination of realism as a 'a system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others' (Pearce 1999: 399; Owens 1994). In this, it attempts to make explicit a formal mode of resistance intuitively used in writings of gay male sex, such as the work of Christos Tsiolkas and Adam Mars-Jones, and in the diaries of Joe Orton.

Research significance

Based on my writing in this field, I was invited to submit the work to *TEXT*, Australia's leading creative writing journal. The work extends research in the field of 'queer' literature, by linking narrative theory with queer readings of literature.

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