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Bodies in boxes: a fictocritical search for the writing process

Biographical note:

Dr Ross Watkins is an author, illustrator, editor and academic. His first major publication is the illustrated book *The Boy Who Grew Into a Tree* (Penguin 2012). He was shortlisted for the 2011 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Emerging Author, and his short fiction and non-fiction works have been published in Australian and international anthologies. Ross is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

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There is a man at my desk with an obsession for broken things—objects, memories, bodies. He searches for such things in what he reads so that he might write about them. He is a writer and a teacher and an editor and a father; although sometimes he thinks he is none of those things. Sometimes he thinks that he is a broken thing.

He reads the opening pages of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*.

He highlights and underlines anything he finds catalytic.

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

Someone, probably my

mother

one or two
ambiguous objects, pieces of things, of which the use was not at once apparent: I could not even tell what they had belonged to.

a recollection of what each had meant to me came back,

Something came and went between us: the intimate pleasure of recognition

it challenged my memory

loosening in my mind

disappointment and defeat.

would be different. everything

contemplating the
accumulation of the past and the duty it imposed on me to sort
it out.

The past made present via objects; memory jogged. He knows his next story is located somewhere here—not in the white of the page but in the imaginative spaces the words create. He thinks of it as leverage. L.P. Hartley is giving him a leg-up.

So is David Malouf. When he reads back over Hartley he cannot help but hear a resonance in Malouf's *12 Edmondstone Street*, in which Malouf writes of two brass jardinières from his childhood house—each either side of the piano and exactly the same in form, but the left jardinière utterly transfigured by the bits and pieces inside, a collection of 'the half lost, the half-found'. Malouf's writing is a remembrance of melancholy objects, things of the past which tell stories of loss, with the body itself becoming a memorialised thing in the act of recollection. His

former self is beyond reach. Malouf cannot be the Malouf of the past because that would entail breaking his own body;

a dismantling of the body's experience that would be a kind of dying, a casting off, one by one, of all the tissues of perception, conscious and not, through which our very notion of body has been remade. (Malouf 1985: 64)

At his desk, the writer is now making rhizomatic connections.

He recently read a student work featuring a mock coronial autopsy report and he remarked at the way a body could be described only according to its measurements—lungs: 930 grams combined; liver: 1650 grams; spleen: 130 grams. This appeals to him and he knows it is something he could write about. If only he could find a story to attach it to.

He begins wondering about the coroner—who he is, how he thinks; the conflict he must confront; the violence intrinsic to his occupation; past violence, future violence; the paperwork he must read to arrive at his findings and then write to communicate those findings as his duty to sort it out. It cannot be a relief to know the exact scientific end of life. Surely not. Surely the coroner must also sit at his desk, and imagine...

The writer searches online for coronial reports to further understand his character. For that is what the coroner has become—a character. He reads a report about the death of a police officer and although he isn't interested in writing about the police officer the flat voice of the narrator has him fixed. There is no stopping the process now.

He writes

These stories are of the past and each past arrives in a box.

I am at my desk. There are three boxes on my desk. The boxes are large and each one exactly the same

proportion. They have been packaged by the same person. Although the boxes are large they are not large enough to hold, say, a human body. Unless the body is broken into fist-sized portions and packed into the box with calculation. Fortunately I have not had to deal with such a case as yet.

And yet all my bodies are broken. All my bodies have not survived conflict. All my bodies and their conflicts are contained within my boxes in the form of filed paper and printed words and it is my job to read these collections and make sense of what happened and out of this sense I am charged with Authority to make recommendations to the Law regarding the body and how it came to be broken. This is my function under the Act of 1980. But I do this because I am a story-teller and it is all I know to do.

I write because

He often asks first year students to complete this sentence and once upon a time he felt compelled to find an answer for himself but now he is beyond it. Not because the question is irrelevant to him but because there are simply too many viable responses—personal, logical, institutional. Publish or perish, they say. If it is the brain which perishes along with the career then, yes.

When he was seventeen he felt his creativity like a blood clot in the heart which would burst an artery unless written out. Writing as an anticoagulant agent—it made sense to him. Now he is almost thirty-four and when he becomes depressed or irritable in the least he knows it's because he is doing too much teaching and all that talking writing, reading writing and marking writing

means that he is not writing and because of that a part of him breaks.

I write because

It doesn't matter how he completes this sentence
—all that matters is that he does write.

The brain dies following
approximately six minutes of
oxygen deprivation.

He writes

Each day I go home from work I see myself in the small rectangular glass pane of the front door. I see myself as a husband or wife might sometimes see their spouse, and I ask: 'Is this job affecting you?' When I ask myself this question I give it much thought: over the lip of a drinking glass, in the face of the microwave, at the foot of the bed. Yes yes, I know. I see the body in everything. 'This is because of your work,' I say. 'The boxes are piled too high. You cannot see over them.'

He writes more. He invites the sea into his story because it can be described as a body of water and so it continues his theme. He writes that the sea can sometimes be a place of violence as well as smiles and in this way the deaths the coroner is currently investigating begin to take on plot. His story is taking shape.

He reads back over everything he has written today and stands and walks away because he has to get some space from it to see more clearly what has been constructed. He believes he is writing a story about a coroner who is meeting his own violent past and maybe his own violent future by sorting through the three boxes on his desk. Inside the boxes are files of paper which tell how his wife and child were killed at the hands of the sea. The boxes are not coffins but the suggestion is enough.

There is doubt about the contents of the third box but the coroner is an ordered man who follows the protocol of opening one box at a time, left to right. Like reading.

The writer seriously considers using text boxes to segment parts of the story as an attempt to draw attention to the idea that a page can also be a box used to contain words and stories like a coffin; a paradoxical coffin for creativity which lives on on the page. But he decides against this. He'll use it for another story, perhaps to signify the fragmented instability of the writing process.

Sometimes in the interlude between writing spells he becomes distracted; he doubts, he dreams. He dreams and writes the beginning of a new story. It's about a pregnant woman who becomes obsessed with vivid dreaming and uses nicotine patches despite the risks to her pregnancy because she heard about their hallucinogenic effects on dreams. For several weeks she tried magic mushrooms but she became too intimidated by the Earth Mother dealer who carried both an earnest smile and an overly healthy child in a convenient for breast-feeding organic cotton wrap.

Dream #1: She is in a car with a man who is driving but the man has no face—he has an ear and a corner of jaw line and the beginning of a high cheek bone profile but beyond this skin dissolves into sweet white light. She is in the passenger seat but for a few seconds she sees the car from above as it drives the highway at a good speed. Very cinematic. Such bullshit, really. Like when the camera angle returns to the internal shot and she's puffing and riding the seat in reverse while giving birth to a baby that's not-so-bloody and not-so-swollen from the pressure of her pelvic floor and vaginal wall. This is a *near*-newborn—far too logistically problematic to get a newborn on screen. Makes sense, but it still annoys the hell out of her, especially now that Reason has entered her dream. And when she recollects this well after the fact it becomes clear why she prefers Dream #2.

He never writes Dream #2.

He returns to the coroner. And this is where the story really starts to gain some momentum; where the story develops an

emotional centre. It is the writer's first considerable attempt at empathy within this story.

I take out the first file and place it on the desk and I open the file and this is how I am introduced to the body in the box. The body in this box is:

Her...

She is not young but also not at all old and although the file details her date of birth I always thought of her as younger than she looked.

She.

'I am falling,' she said and it was into me that she implied.

Her dress was yellow. Summer. Cut across her chest to exhibit her clavicle. No necklace. No need for adornment. Just adoration. For her and the way she spoke Latin as though it was the customary tongue. She told me later how she had practised Latin just for me, as a way to impress because she knew I was a story-teller but she did not know at that time what kind of story-teller and the sad and violent stories that a coroner must tell.

She fell into me on green lawn and all I saw was yellow and a sea-blue sky and the see-through blue of her eyes and she asked me if I would one day tell her story and I told her that I hoped not.

She is not the writer's wife but she could be. He remembers the first time he read Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*—so prevailing was his sense of awe for her melancholy poetic and aesthetic that it still lingers. Winterson's words infuse his. Particularly the narrator's 'love-poem' to Louise, apparently

dying of cancer, in which Louise's body is anatomically split in the narrator's recollection of her. But although her body is broken, it is also made whole again via the narrator's memory. He finds beauty in this and so he thinks that if someone believes his story is simply sad then perhaps they have not yet recognised that there is homage here. That in the death of the body object there is a tender splendour.

I became obsessed with anatomy. If I could not put Louise out of my mind I would drown myself in her. Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognise her even when her body had long since fallen away. (Winterson 1992: 111)

The writer finds this suitable for the coroner, whose job it is to open the box of his wife's metaphysical body and tell her story. Even though he always hoped not to.

The boy follows. The last thing a father wants is to be the one who tells the story of his young son's death. Empathy twofold. And even before the writer writes about the boy he is already affected by the impending past tragedy. The writer has always been obsessed with father narratives but ever since he became a father he portrays the father-son relationship with less angst, more joy and sorrow. He hopes to imbue his stories with the love and wonder his sons have brought into his life so to write of the boy's death renders a physical impact on the writer's body—his heart crumples as though betrayed by what the brain can entertain.

But a writer must write.

I lift the lid and the body in
this box is:

Him.

He is too young to be in a box of this kind. The boxes he liked were also of cardboard but were boxes in which I had cut holes for his arms and a hole for his head to stick out of and laugh that silly laugh which must be rapture made flesh and audio. Laughter that originates in the chest and rumbles through the ribs like bubbling water and out into the space between him and me and her in his bedroom with his new bed because he is ‘A big boy now,’ he says and we agree and laugh more because he has grown so quickly and looks older than he is according to his date of birth, which is written here at the top of the file on my desk right now but I know it already anyway. A file which contains many many words but none which spell ‘laughter’ or even invoke it other than as a sad and violent nostalgia.

Bereft, the writer begins to question why he’s telling this story at all and fantasises about incorporating it into some kind of fictocritical search for the writing process instead. But he looks at the third box on his desk and he knows that whatever it contains will provide him with a reason to go on. He writes that the climax is the moment when each character meets their conflict and looks their conflict in the eye and finds... he writes defeat but in writing this the writer triumphs—he now knows how the story will end.

The writer sleeps and while he sleeps the coroner dreams and
the writer

writes

I dream that I am at my desk.
There is one box on my desk.
It is unopened. I try opening it
but the lid is stubborn. I stand
on the desk and pull back my
sleeves and I bend at the knees
and then I pull on the lid and
my arms strain and then I fall
from the desk and I am on the
floor and I have hit my head
but in my hands is the lid. I
get up. I go to the desk. I put
the lid on the desk and rub my
head and look into the box and
in the box I see myself, in
pieces, organised into parts
according to function, my
liver my left hand my heart
neatly labelled and my face on
top eyes wide staring back at
me and then I raise an
eyebrow in a cunning way and
I ask myself: 'Do you
understand?'

When the writer wakes he realises that he has in fact written
himself into a box. A kind of story-based suicide. Yet he is
simultaneously outside of this box, looking in on himself; a third
person point of view. Do I understand? There is a loosening in
my mind, an intimate pleasure of recognition. I decide to sort it
out...

There is a man at my desk
with an obsession for broken
things—objects, memories,
bodies. He searches for such
things in what he reads so that
he might write about them. He
is a writer and a teacher and
an editor and a father;
although sometimes he thinks
he is none of those things.
Sometimes he thinks that he is
a broken thing.

Research Statement

Research background

Anna Gibbs establishes fictocriticism as ‘writing as research, stubbornly insisting on the necessity of a certain *process* in these days when writing is treated by those who determine what counts as research to be a transparent medium, always somehow *after the event*’ (2005: np). Gibbs further discusses the ‘subtle activities of the body’ and their affect on the writing process, a concept which neatly adjoins fictional explorations of the body, writing and memory in Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street* and Winterson’s *Written on the Body*.

Research contribution

Bodies in Boxes plaits fictional, critical and autobiographical discourses in a fictocritical search of the process involved in writing ‘Coronial Inquest’ (*Meniscus* 2013). The work accounts for the fictional texts researched in the creation of the short story and enmeshes this research with a third person narrative exploration of the writer’s intentions, apprehensions and other (tangential) embedded narratives. Cannibalising my own work, *Bodies in Boxes* enacts an ‘encounter between the writer’s emergent, embodied subjectivity and what is written about’ (Gibbs 2005).

Research significance

Bodies in Boxes exemplifies Gibbs’ ideas while responding to post-structural explorations of assumed, sought and mythologised connections between the implied author (bodily/textually), narrator and character. In doing so the work teases out extant harmonies and tensions between scholarship and authorship in a creative writing context, as well as mapping themes of loss, melancholy objects and metaphorical representations of the body.

Works cited

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