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The spaces between: examining young adult creative practice within an academic context

Abstract:

Drawing upon ideas of practice-led research outlined by Webb and Brien (2008), and considering these within the context of my own creative practice, this article explores the intersections of the positions of writer-as-teacher, writer-as-artist, and writer-as-scholar. This is contextualized with reference to three of my creative works from different phases of my career, *A New Kind of Dreaming* (2001), *Fires shadow* (2005) and *Daywards* (2010). Framed by Webb's argument for the appropriateness of Bourdieu's ideas to practice-led research (2012) and Nodelman's suggestions about the relationship between habitus and the agency of young-adult writers (2008), it will examine the degree to which my construction of young protagonists has been shaped by, and has in turn shaped, my changing *habitus* as a practicing young adult writer and scholar of children's literature. Drawing upon my dual roles as scholar and teacher of creative writing within the academy, and reader and scholar of children's literature studies, it argues that the liminality of the scholarly/creative space emerging from this nexus has impacted upon the ways I consider and construct my 'child' characters and my own position in relation to them.

Biographical note:

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The writer within the academy

In the introduction to their 2007 paper ‘Agnostic’ thinking: creative writing as practice led research’, Webb and Brien outline the issues implicit in an artist taking upon themselves the role of research academic. They explore the implications of the apparent tension that exists at the nexus between the common epistemological positions impacting upon the creation of ‘contributions to knowledge’, and the philosophical and aesthetic considerations that come into play in the ‘making’ of art. They broadly characterise the position of the artist/academic as one requiring its subject to negotiate a space in which they must consciously deconstruct the binary positions suggested by common conceptions of artistic work within and without the academic world.

Artists in the academy operate under opposing imperatives. As artists, we need to produce work according to the logic of creative production: work that is autonomous (made “for art’s sake”) and critically respected. We also need to produce work according to the logic of the field of knowledge production, work that is not only rigorous, but also provides economic benefits through research reporting and the attraction of research students. These roles have often been seen as mutually exclusive; and/or adding an extra load to the already full schedules of any artist in the university. Most importantly, the commingling of these roles has been thought likely to diminish the art produced, while not necessarily generating fine scholarly work (2007:1).

It is worth noting that the tensions identified by Webb and Brien in 2007 have neither diminished nor fundamentally shifted in the proceeding years. A 2013 survey of Australian writer academics, conducted by researchers at the University of Canberra, invited 120 practicing writer/scholars to reflect upon their lived experiences within the fields of academic research and creative practice. Of the 60 respondents, a clear majority (73.21%) preferred to identify themselves primarily as creative writers who work within the academy, rather than primarily as academics who write creatively. This response suggests that the observation by Kroll, made in 2006, that; ‘At present teacher-writers in the Australian postmodern academy suffer from a profusion – or confusion – of roles’ (2006:1) continues to express itself in the present day context.

In the same 2013 survey, writer/scholars were asked to respond to questions that, to varying degrees, deliberately implied a binary relationship between creative and scholarly outputs. While responses to open-ended questions indicated broad acceptance of the notion that working within a contemporary creative/academic environment *should* ideally collapse any perceived binary between ‘creative’ and ‘scholarly’ approaches to knowledge generation, responses to the fixed-scale questions suggested a strong tendency among scholars working within this field to nevertheless unconsciously apply this binary when thinking and discussing the lived experience of their day-to-day career. The responses went some way to illustrating the observation by Webb and Brien that;

despite complaints and resistances, this is where we now find ourselves: straddling two contradictory positions ... One response is to explicate what is involved in our work as university-based arts practitioners, which is in part a bringing together of research and practice. These are terms frequently set in an oppositional relationship, although, like

any binary pair, they are far more connected and equivalent than they might first appear (2007: 1).

Taking this idea of creative practice-led research as inviting a reflexive and explicatory examination of creative practice as lived experience, this paper seeks to examine the apparently contradictory positions implied in the academic/creative career nexus through an examination of the author's own creative work across the last two decades. In doing so, it adopts the position that the creative and scholarly space which has emerged from this nexus – a space the author's creative practices now both shape and are in turn shaped by – might best be described as liminal. In using this term, I am drawing upon Turner's 1967 adaptation of Van Gennep's idea of liminality, notably his assertion that 'If our basic model of society is that of a "structure of positions", we must regard the period of margins or "liminality" as an interstructural situation.' (1967: 93) When considered in the light of the Webb's application of the Bourdeausian concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' to the discipline of academic creative writing (to be discussed shortly), the idea of the 'invisibility' of the 'liminal personae' (1964: 95-96) as it negotiates a shifting set of positions becomes, I believe, a useful lens through which to examine both my own position in relation to my creative practice, and the position of the writer/academic within the academy more broadly.

My argument is that this liminality impacts significantly, in both positive and negative ways, upon the ability of the creative researcher to operate effectively within the contemporary academy. In this, I am adapting Karen Brooks' 1998 assertion (made in relation to abjection) that liminal space is a useful motif for the examination of apparently binary positions in that; '... it blurs borders, it is a threshold at which binary opposites undo themselves and where meaning becomes fluid and dynamic' (1998: 91).

In arguing that the idea of liminality can be usefully applied to the explication of my own reflexive practice, this paper interrogates the concluding suggestion of Webb's 2012 paper 'The Logic of Practice? Art, the academy, and fish out of water', and attempts to apply it to my own habitus and lived experience within the fields of education, artistic practice, and formal research practice.

Webb's application of Bourdieu's analysis of the discourse and operation of sociology to the contemporary creative arts disciplines makes explicit the philosophical tensions between conflicting elements of the 'fields' of creative practice and research, and the degree to which both are wrestling with the implicit conflicts between artistic and academic habitus. Her conclusion suggests that it is from the re-negotiation of this space and of these tensions that the 'field' of creative practice led research is emerging:

I suggest ... that artist-academics apply a reflexive dimension to their creative and practical knowledge, in order to contribute knowledge that is recognised as such within the art disciplines: refining the methodology, design and methods found in research literature so that they are better suited to creative thinking and seeing; reminding the academy more broadly about the extent to which imagination, chance and tacit knowledges actually drive research practice; being explicit about the difference

between professional, aesthetic and research practice; and thus breaking the barriers of the apparent antinomies in which so many find themselves caught. A redrafting of both the individual habitus and cultural field has the potential to result in something genuinely new: a new kind of academic who is simultaneously a new kind of artist, making a new kind of object in a reconceptualised field (2012: 14).

In attempting to apply the notion of liminality to the space that has formed around my own creative and artistic practice, this paper supports Webb's assertion above and acts – hopefully – as an exemplar of the type of conscious re-drafting of habitus and field that she argues for.

The writer – history, habitus and fields

This paper is, inevitably, more personal and subjective than any I have previously written. In part, this is because of the conception of practice led research outlined above. In this, it is also something of an exemplar of several of the tensions identified by Webb and Brien in 2007. The methodology here – that of conscious, reflexive analysis of my own work – is one that to this point in my academic career, I have deliberately avoided.

This is largely due to the tensions between fields – methodologically, my research background (or if you prefer, my habitus) has its origins within the rationalist fields of literary studies (in my undergraduate degree), political science (in my honours degree), and education and pedagogy (my first postgraduate studies), rather than in fields employing Webb and Brien's 'agnostic research' (2007: 3). While my doctorate consisted of a creative component – a young adult speculative fiction novel – the accompanying research exegesis drew not upon a reflexive model of self-analysis, but rather upon a combination of quantitative statistical analysis, heavily informed by my background using Statistical Processing for Social Sciences (SPSS) to build data sets in political science, and by close reading of significant texts by authors other than myself, drawn from literary studies.

In this, my research career to date has tended to demonstrate something of a schism. While my creative practice has continued to be at the heart of my academic career – both as a teacher and as a researcher – I have nevertheless avoided any analytical focus upon my own work in my research publications. Instead, in my research writing, I have consciously turned my gaze outward as much as possible; maintaining the 'objective' perspective of the literary studies scholar. This reluctance to enter the space of 'radical subjectivity engendered by creative labour' (Strange 2012) is in part because of my own habitus and in part because of an acute awareness of the 'disapproval' of colleagues in 'traditional' fields of research as to the validity of practice-led research.

The problem, from my point of view as creator and artist, is that in adopting this epistemological position I have placed myself in a working space outside the field in which I have the most practical experience. As a case in point: my research to date has tended to rely heavily upon the methodologies of the field of Literary Studies. While this has had positive impacts upon several aspects of my creative practice, (as

will be discussed later in this paper) it has simultaneously led to a ‘distance’ in the degree to which I allow my creative works to ‘consume’ my time.

Prior to my full time career as an academic, my current creative project – whatever it might have been – was inevitably at the core of my priorities. As my career within the academy has progressed, however, there has been a noticeable shift away from the production of creative works and towards more ‘traditional’ research projects (a shift clearly mapped in the decline in the number of creative outputs I have published since my first full-time appointment in 2009). In this, my own experience mirrors the findings of the 2013 research survey mentioned earlier. It also suggests a lived example of the ‘problem’ that Webb and Brien identified as facing artist/academics who adopt methodology and theory from other fields in order to gain the approval of the academy.

A very common approach is to import theories from other disciplines and use them as interpretive tools. There is value in this: literary studies, for instance, offers a number of valuable approaches to texts that can be applied by artist-researchers ... but there is a risk in importing techniques from other disciplines Literary studies, for instance, focuses on the meaning of a particular work, the social location of the author, the investment of readers and so on - all useful in delimiting the work itself, but all focussed on the literary or aesthetic elements of the work, and not on its knowledge generation. Implicit also within the framing rhetoric of literary studies is an understanding that such investigation is a practice carried on by someone who is not the maker of the work and can, therefore, claim some sense of objective distance in relation to the work (2007: 8).

This brings us back to the notion proposed in the first section of this paper, that the application of liminality might function as a useful lens through which to examine the creative/academic space in which I find myself operating. Much of my formal research, from my PhD onwards, has concentrated upon the degree to which adolescent literature might be usefully viewed as operating within a ‘liminal’ space, rather than as a ‘transitional’ literature moderating between the concrete ages of childhood and adulthood (See Eaton 2010; 2013). It strikes me in approaching this paper that the intersections between the various fields in which I take positions, and the apparent binaries that I have attempted to negotiate in both my creative works and my scholarly research, suggests that in the reformation and re-imagination of my own habitus, my work as a creative academic can be usefully viewed through a similar lens, and that doing so makes a contribution to the ‘re-conceptualising’ of the field asserted by Webb (2013: 14).

As such, this paper will next consider the construction of protagonists from three novels from different and distinct periods of my creative career. Each can be read as significant in terms of the shifting habitus that they suggest and in terms of the fields within which I was negotiating my creative practice at the time.

The first, *A New Kind of Dreaming* (Eaton 2001), was written during my final years as a full-time high school teacher and is a contemporary adventure novel with a strongly didactic undercurrent reflective of cultural issues surrounding the politicisation of refugee arrivals by boat in Australia during the late 1990’s. The

second, *Firesadow* (2005) is a piece of historical fiction, written in the year immediately following my resignation as a high school teacher and before the commencement of my PhD studies. During this period I was primarily concerning myself with the aesthetics of my writing and less with the ‘requirements’ of a young adult readership. The final of the three, *Daywards* (2010) was the last book in a speculative fiction trilogy, written after the completion of my PhD and during my first two years of full-time employment as a university teacher/researcher. During this period I was more consciously attempting to explore questions of liminality and the close consideration of the function of binary spaces in both my academic and creative work.

Taken together, this slice of my body of creative work to date reveals a shifting understanding of both the fields in which my creative practice operates, and of the habitus that has informed that process.

A New Kind of Dreaming – writer as teacher

In his book *The Hidden Adult* (2008), Perry Nodelman argues that the role of the adult in ‘children’s literature’ (as moderator, producer, interpreter, critic, scholar) is fundamental to the genre, rather than being an anathema to it. While this argument continues to be contested and is largely outside the scope of this particular paper, his observation below – in which he acknowledges the possibility that the individual writer of children’s literature might have some degree of agency in influencing the way in which their own books take positions within the field of children’s literature – is important. He goes on to attribute this notion of limited agency to the varying degrees to which authors are aware of the influence of their own habitus upon their works.

Exploration of children’s literature as a genre should provide information about what powerful forces in society, rightly or wrongly, believe literature should be and do and, therefore, about what child readers should be and do ... In doing so, this sort of approach should show how specific texts of children’s literature are complex sites of social action ... In focussing specifically on these matters as aspects of a habitus, however, this approach avoids the one-sided assumption that literature exists only as a manifestation of societal forces. It ascribes some agency to individual writers who possess varying degrees of a feel for the field and are able to express that feel by drawing on methods that emerge from their own person history and experience (Nodelman 2008: 125).

He has also argued, however, that the habitus of a text is not *solely* in the domain of the author, but should be broadly ascribed to a wider range of forces, of which the author’s conscious awareness of his or her own position is just one; ‘Writers find success in proportion to their understanding of the field’s habitus – their feel for what kinds of children’s texts are possible or useful to produce or recommend or disperse ... this means that the habitus is inscribed in the texts themselves’ (2008: 123).

Nodelman’s assertion is useful as a way for the academic creative writer to examine, with the benefit of hindsight, the impact of his or her habitus upon the positions

adopted and reflected in their own works. Certainly the limited but nevertheless agentic influence of my own awareness of the ‘field’ of ‘young adult literature’ at the time of the production of my second novel is writ large upon the text itself, and is similarly evident in the commercial success of the novel in the years since publication.

A New Kind of Dreaming is novel that demonstrates both conscious and unconscious awareness of the ‘requirements’ of the field of Australian young adult fiction at the time of writing, as well as being illustrative of the interplay between social, political and economic forces in the shaping of Australian culture in the intervening years. The book is the bestselling of my eleven published novels to date. After its initial publication in 2001, the novel has reprinted nine times, in 2002, 2003, 2004 (twice), 2005, 2006, 2008, 2011 and a new edition, with updated jacket and design in 2012.

The novel’s critical success was positive, but not spectacular, especially when compared to its commercial longevity, and this raises a key question in regard to the book’s commercial success – why this particular work? From an authorial and reflexive point of view, it’s by no means the work I’m proudest of; it’s excessively didactic, the writing is fine, but not as aesthetically satisfying as work I’ve done since, the plot is slightly contrived in parts with a reliance upon magic realism and deus-ex-machina devices that doesn’t sit altogether comfortably with me nowadays, and the ending does not feel fully resolved.

So, to repeat the question, why this book?

The answer, I believe, lies in the demographics of the sales. And that, in turn, speaks to the broader habitus of both the work and the field. Sales for *A New Kind of Dreaming* tend to spike in the first weeks of February each year, when schools are coming back and booklists are being purchased. The book has become a staple of many middle-school reading lists across the country and this has been a major contributor to its longevity. The reasons for this might be traced to a number of cultural forces – illustrative of Nodelman’s assertion of young adult literature as a ‘complex site of social action’ (2008: 125), as well as to my own habitus at the time of writing.

The political context

Early drafts of the novel (then titled *Karjini*) were written between 1995-1998, during the period of the Australian Human Rights Commission ‘National Enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal Families and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families’ (1995–1997). This enquiry culminated in the release of the ‘Bringing Them Home’ report (1997). At the same time, since the introduction of mandatory detention for unauthorised refugee arrivals by the Keating government in 1992, the reforms to immigration policy of the Howard administration following its election in 1996, and the introduction of temporary protection visas by that same government in 1999 (see Betts 2003), the issue of Immigration policy and especially the treatment of ‘illegal’ boat arrivals had become increasingly politicised in Australian political and cultural discourse. Stories about ‘boat people’ regularly featured on the news, and the

conversation surrounding the discussion in the media, was becoming increasingly polarised and strident. *The Bulletin* magazine, for example, ran on its cover for September 6th, 1994, a full-page photograph of an Asian child behind a barbed wire fence, above which ran the headline ‘Boat People’ in large text. Below was the caption; ‘The do-gooders say they should stay; the realists disagree. Who will win as the next invasion looms?’ (1994: Cover)

Certainly these two issues – the acknowledgement of the impact of Australian colonialism upon Aboriginal people and the politicisation of refugee policy in relation to boat arrivals – impacted significantly upon my thinking and ideas when plotting the original drafts of the novel. These were written in first person and told from the perspective of an Aboriginal youth who has been put into foster care and discovers the ruins of an abandoned refugee boat on a beach somewhere outside the small northern W.A. town to which he has been sent.

Later drafts, written in 2000-2001, were heavily influenced by Melissa Lukashenko’s article ‘Muwi muwi-nyhin, binung goonj: boastful talk and broken ears’ (2000). This powerful discussion paper addresses questions of cultural appropriation, cultural specificity, and the narrative positions that non-Indigenous writers should be aware of in portraying Indigenous culture in creative works. It had and continues to have a significant influence upon not just this novel, but upon my creative habitus as an ‘Australian’ young adult writer. In the light of this article, the novel was extensively rewritten, the point of view shifted from first to third person, and issues of race and ethnicity deliberately excluded from the text. The physical setting was reworked to be fully fictionalised, and less tied to a specific place and country.

The resulting novel is, I believe, more rather than less effective in its capacity to bring into discussion issues of race, ethnicity, and colonialism, and to question the issues surrounding the use of power in the management of refugee detention. The fact that these questions have not vanished from Australian cultural discourse in the intervening years suggests that the answer to the question posed earlier – why this novel? – lies within a number of factors. The first is its comparatively early awareness of the impact of refugee discourse upon the changing shape of Australian cultural image, the second its deliberate adoption of an ambiguous narrative position in regard to issues of race and ethnicity, and the third being my own authorial position as a high school English and literature teacher with an acute awareness of the impact of the bildungsroman narrative upon my target readership.

The habitus of the novel is, as Nodelman suggests, ‘inscribed’ upon the text itself, and can be viewed with the benefit of hindsight as one shaped by a multiplicity of liminal positions; shaped within the text by the deliberate deconstruction of the importance of the protagonist’s ethnicity, by the treatment of the setting as a transitional space between the sea and the desert, and through the use of ghosts, hauntings and conscious dream states as plot devices and motifs throughout. Outside the text, forces such as the development of refugee discourse, the changing ‘field’ of Australian young adult writing, and changing understandings about the issues implicit in non-indigenous writers approaching Indigenous stories and characters, have all had similar impacts upon the habitus that emerges from the narrative.

***Fireshadow* – writer as artist**

My fourth published novel, *Fireshadow* (2004) was conceived in late 2001, during my second last year of high school teaching. The novel was very much shaped by my increasing interest in writing at the ‘boundaries’ of young adult fiction and my decision to leave secondary school teaching at the end of 2002 to pursue a career as a full-time writer. The novel, a historical fiction squarely targeted at an older readership than my previous works, was written primarily during 2002 and 2003. During this period I resigned from secondary teaching and moved to Brisbane to be close to my publisher and editor. The final drafts were written in mid-late 2003, immediately before moving back to Perth to commence my doctorate.

The novel, therefore, emerged from a transitional and borderless phase of my life. One important aspect of this period was the absence of regular, reliable income, which meant that there was a necessity for me to make a living doing ‘the circuit’ – speaking gigs at schools and festivals. During this time I met many of my peers within the Australian young adult writing community and was regularly exposed to conversations surrounding questions of creativity, process, and definition; who were these ‘young adults’ for whom we were writing? How did we deal with the questions about when we were going to write ‘real books’ for adults? Through these discussions I began to reformulate my habitus and renegotiate – along with many of my peers – my conception of the field in which I was working and the positions I was adopting within it.

One significant meeting during this period was with author Markus Zusak. Zusak’s novel *The Book Thief* (2005) would later become an enormous commercial and critical success and one of the first Australian novels deliberately cross-marketed to both adult and young adult readerships in different countries. At the time of our initial meeting, though, it was his fourth novel, *The Messenger* (2002) that had a tremendous impact upon my own habitus. Zusak’s 19-year-old protagonist, Ed Kennedy, is an artfully liminal creation; deliberately placed between adolescence and adulthood, between country and city, between education and employment, between family and emancipation, between legal and illegal:

My full name’s Ed Kennedy. I’m nineteen. I’m an under-age cab driver. I’m typical of many of the young men you see in this suburban outpost of the city – not a whole lot of prospects or possibility. That aside, I read more books than I should, and I’m decidedly crap at sex and doing my taxes. Nice to meet you (2002: 6).

The Messenger, along with discussions with its author, heavily impacted upon my conception of the ‘field’ of Australian young adult writing and my ability to shape, as much as be shaped, by that field. When the Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) awarded it the 2003 ‘Book of the Year’ award for Older Readers, I became intrigued from an aesthetic perspective with the degree to which that decision might be seen as imprimatur, from this significant cultural force, of an increasing acceptance of books which challenged the ‘traditional’ conceptions of ‘young adult’ literature in the Australian writing landscape. This question would later become the focus of my PhD thesis, however my primary concern in 2003 was how it might allow me to renegotiate my own creative practice; to revise exactly *who* I was writing for.

This re-negotiation is evident in the habitus of *Fireshadow*. It is the first of my works in which I consciously (as opposed to the unconscious process in *A New Kind of Dreaming*) adopted a series of liminal motifs and ideas in my creative work to reflect what I saw as the changing shape of my chosen creative field. The title itself was intended to evoke an image of a zone of uncertainty; a space between heat and cold, between light and dark. Similarly, my two protagonists were deliberately placed between worlds. The contemporary protagonist, Vinnie, is eighteen-years-old; the badly-scarred survivor of a car wreck in which his older sister was killed. Unable to deal with his own and his parent's grief, he flees to the forest and camps in the ruins of an abandoned town site; a setting caught between the past and the present:

The clearing was the site of an old forestry town that had burned in the nineteen-sixties and never been rebuilt – that much was written on his map. But he'd have thought that by now the bush would have reclaimed the old town site – wasn't that what was supposed to happen? Shouldn't there have been a few lumps of concrete and tin and perhaps a stone chimney or two dotted between the trees? But nothing remained, not even ruins, and the forest still stood aloof, leaving the scar of the old town site as an empty, grassy slope ... it seemed almost as though this particular place, once home to loggers and their families, was no longer fit to be forest (2004: 6).

Similarly, the historical protagonist, Erich, is a young German soldier, captured in Libya and sent – like many Wehrmacht soldiers – to an Australian prisoner of war camp. Again, there is a very deliberate positioning of this protagonist in 'between' spaces; between freedom and capture, between cultures and, like Vinnie, between adulthood and adolescence.

In this, the impact of Zusak's *The Messenger* – and of other writers like Sonya Hartnett who were at the time challenging the boundaries of young adult writing in Australia – upon my own conception of 'the field' is apparent. The habitus evident in *Fireshadow* is shaped not so much by the political and cultural concerns of the author, as with *A New Kind of Dreaming*, but rather by a drive to more aesthetic and experimental writing and a concern with renegotiating a field of creative practice in order to transcend its traditional boundaries.

This shift in habitus is evident throughout the book and is the reason for it being, in many ways, a novel of 'firsts' for me; my first sex scene, my first above-school-aged protagonist, my first split narrative, my first published poem (as an epigram). Perhaps the most significant example of this conscious re-structuring of my field is in the third 'part' of the novel. Where sections 1, 2 and 4 adopt a reasonably conventional third person omniscient, past tense point of view, with each chapter split into two narrative strands, alternating between the present and the past, the third section was an abrupt departure.

Encouraged by conversations with my writing peers, and inspired by a scene from British novelist Patrick Gale's (very definitely not young adult) novel *The Facts of Life* (1995), the third section of *Fireshadow* switches to present tense, and a limited third person point of view focusing entirely upon one of the secondary characters, an eighteen-year-old girl who finds herself unmarried and pregnant in post-war Perth. The section covers the nine months of her pregnancy and was written with close

attention to the aesthetics of the language, as much as to the plot. It was intended to put the reader ‘into the moment’, rather than to tell them a story, and was written with little to no consideration for the traditional ideas of what is or is not ‘appropriate’ writing for ‘young adult’ readers:

She walks automatically, along empty suburban streets and past silent rows of shops. The greengrocers and butchers are quiet, their painted wooden signs swinging wildly in the wind, their windows dark and empty. It rains harder and harder, but still she walks, embracing the cold and the wet as she would a lover. Feeling the chill fingers of the storm weave through her hair, slide down her neck and trickle gently along her back (2004: 196).

Where *A New Kind of Dreaming* was commercially successful, *Fireshadow* is perhaps the most critically successful of my novels; awarded the 2005 WA Premier’s Literary Prize for Young Adult Fiction, shortlisted in the 2005 South Australian Premier’s Awards, and awarded an Honour Book prize in the 2005 CBCA Book of the Year awards. This success was crucial to the development of my creative practice in many ways, perhaps most significantly in that it re-enforced my belief in my ability to actively contribute to the reformation of my field. To put it into Nodelman’s terms, it was perhaps the first time that I ‘found success in relation to my understanding of the field’s habitus’ (2008: 123).

This shift was a key factor in my decision to pursue a doctorate, with a research focus upon the shifting landscape of Australian ‘young adult fiction’. And with that return to formal research and study, I unconsciously shifted back from a primarily aesthetic focus in my creative practice to a more formalised one – a habitus informed by my research and formal education background to that point, rather than by the ‘radical subjectivity’ that Webb and others have argued in favour of.

***Daywards* – writer as scholar**

My most recently published novel, *Daywards* (UQP 2010) was written during my first year of full-time employment as a creative writing lecturer in an Australian tertiary institution. The final book of a speculative fiction trilogy and the concluding chapter to the sequence that began with the creative component of my PhD thesis (*Nightpeople*, 2005), it is a novel heavily informed by my positions in the fields of both scholarly and creative practice.

The plot, which takes the form of the classic ‘quest’ narrative so ubiquitous in much speculative fiction, reflects an established research interest in liminality and liminal spaces as useful devices by which conceptions of adolescence and adulthood (and the boundaries between them, perceived or otherwise) might be shaped. The primary settings – a cave on an escarpment between the forest and the sea, the ruins of a futuristic ‘sky city’ now fallen to earth, and the vast expanse of the central southern Australian desert – were all deliberately intended to evince ideas surrounding the unimportance of constructed boundaries.

Thematically the novel, which tracks the journey of the descendants of the protagonists of the first two novels in the trilogy as they return to the *Darklands* from

which their cultures originally emerged after some sort of environmental catastrophe, speaks to contemporary cultural concerns surrounding the role of science as both saviour and destroyer of worlds, to the tensions between rationalist and spiritualist thinking in cultural formation, and questions the ways that patriarchal power is embedded and maintained in contemporary society:

While he'd been speaking, a small knot of uncles had gradually formed behind him – probably fifteen men, most of them big, and a couple with hunting spears held loosely between their fingers. The threat was not at all subtle. Xani nodded at them.

“We all agree that this is the best way to run things, at least for the moment, so that’s how it’s gonna be.” There was a challenge in his words and in the flash of his eyes as he held the stares of the rest of the clan (2010: 38).

It is in the conception of the two child protagonists and the world that they inhabit, however, that this novel is most clearly reflective of a changing habitus, and of clear shifts in my own thinking about the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood. In the previous two novels in the trilogy, *Nightpeople* (2005) and *Skyfall* (2007), there was a technology-driven division between those characters who could survive in the outside world, and those who couldn't. In *Daywards*, this division was very deliberately shifted so that only the children can survive the daylight, whereas the adults are confined to darkness; having to shelter in deep caves during the daylight hours in order to survive. This device renders the child characters as agentic, as they are the only ones able to hunt and therefore feed their community. At the same time it infantilises the adults, forcing them to build and maintain power through other means, such as through the enforcing of patriarchal rules and ‘traditions’ which can be easily challenged once the children are able to see past the facade of constructed ‘adult’ power.

It is a conceit that reflects my developing interest in the ways childhood and gender agency are reflected in narrative text. It is also a clear example of the degree to which my creative practice at the time was being increasingly influenced by the work of my colleagues in the field of literary studies. Scholars such as Parsons (2008), Hateley (2009), and numerous others who I had met and engaged with through my association with the Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research (ACLAR), reflect in their work what Webb might describe as an ‘academic habitus’ – one that:

values a commitment to knowledge; a concern for intellectual rigour; a commitment to experiment and analysis; and a rejection of ‘commonsense’ and mystique in favour of long training, constant testing of knowledge claims, and transparency of findings (2012: 9).

Despite consciously constructing a world in my creative work that was powerfully influenced by the thinking of my colleagues in literary studies, the fact that until very recently I have felt unable to adequately reflect upon that work in a ‘scholarly’ context speaks clearly to a shift in habitus, and also to a shift in my conception of my position within the ‘field’ of writer/scholar.

It also speaks to the problem faced by other writer academics as they attempt to negotiate the field of their creative practice. In 2010, a colleague from literary studies

wrote me an email as part of a discussion outlining what they saw as the major problem facing me in negotiating the multiple ‘spaces’ of my academic career; ‘I’m under the impression that you’re looking to bridge the divide between children’s lit academia and your career as a CL writer’ (2010: Personal communication)

My colleague used the analogy of a children’s author engaging in the literary studies world as being akin to a parent turning up at a conference of child psychologists to give a paper about their child; the parent might have a wealth of knowledge and ideas about their particular offspring, but their relationship to the child and lack of discipline-specific knowledge throws much of what they have to say into a position of being hopelessly biased, and of little interest to the audience. Certainly, until recently, this analogy was highly influential in terms of shaping of my own habitus, especially in relation to the way that I viewed my role within the academy.

The analogy only tells half the story, though. Awareness of the ‘divide’ to which my colleague referred has – as the central conceit of *Daywards* suggests – also significantly shaped my creative practice and my conception of the field in which I work, just as my discussions with and reading of the work of writers like Zusak and Hartnett shaped my creative practice in the early-mid 2000’s. Ultimately, the ‘divide’ between children’s literature writing and study, while still there, is increasingly unravelling for me.

Conclusion

Webb writes that:

Fields are not fixed or concrete spaces. They are conceptual spaces that are actualised by individuals and organisations who share specific interests, aims and characteristics. Each individual brings with them their subtly or radically different histories, tastes and dispositions – their habitus – and how they operate within that field is going to have an effect on how the field is formed ... Similarly, habitus is not set in stone; as that individual participates in a field, their new experiences, the context in which they operate, the imperatives and the logics of that field, and their interaction with others in the same field, are all going to have an effect on their own habitus. They may change – deform or reform – the field in which they operate, but they themselves will be changed by that experience (2012: 7).

Webb’s assertions as to the applicability of Bourdieu’s notions of fields and habitus to scholarly creative practice-led research, and her observations as to the fluidity of the concepts, serve as an effective illustration of the degree to which the idea of liminality can be a useful means of describing a position within the field. Certainly, viewed in the self-reflexive light of changes in my own understanding of the fields in which I have adopted positions, and of the habitus which I can see inscribed upon my novels over the course of the last decade-and-a-half, this idea of liminality; the transgression of boundaries; the increasing irrelevance of binaries, is a powerful one.

As a practitioner of Australian young adult fiction writing, it has allowed me to sit astride traditional boundaries of readerships, of structure, of themes, of expectations. As a working scholar within the academy, it has informed my reading of both my own

and other's texts, my 'traditional' peer reviewed research and, more recently, my willingness to examine and utilise my creative practice as valid and useful research. In this, it hopefully acts as an exemplar – albeit a limited one – of the ongoing re-conceptualisation of the multiple and overlapping fields and habitus which continue to shape my creative practice.

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