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**Confronting the dark: using practice-led research to write about death**

Abstract:

In this article, I describe how my personal experience of death prompted the writing of a novel and how the practice of writing about death led me to develop a critical inquiry into Continental philosophy and other theories of death. I discuss philosophical approaches to living authentically in the face of death and the human tendency to search for meaning. I undertake a close reading of Helen Garner's *The Spare Room* (2008) in light of these issues and the changing attitudes to death since modernism, particularly the need for open communication about death and the importance for the dying in feeling that their life has significance for other people.

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### **Introduction: death in creative practice**

I began writing my novel as a fictive response to my father's death in 2009 and my creative practice has, therefore, been a conversation about death. Margaret Atwood says:

not just some, but *all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead (2002: 140).

From the beginning, I had titled my PhD thesis 'Confronting the dark'. I consider the novel that was part of this project to be a confrontation with the fact of death as I experienced it, as well as a process of rediscovering the value of life through creative activity. In making a narrative trip into the Underworld, the writer brings back the story and, like Joseph Campbell's hero, makes a return in a way that the dead cannot. It is true that story can function to bring some things that were dead back to life. My novel found its way out of the dark following my father's life and death in a narrative-death-narrative circularity that could otherwise be described as life-death-life. While this sounds like I am suggesting that writing about death brings about a rebirth, it does not feel this way. In experiencing death as the other, the one who lives, the loss still feels like a permanent end. Grief is just the questions 'Where have you gone?' and 'What was it all for?'

What I have discovered in writing about death is that the novel itself may or may not say anything meaningful about death (I can hardly tell) but I have been changed through the act of writing it. Following Foucault, Warwick Mules describes a relationship between art and artist in which, 'we should form a relation not with ourselves, but with the creative activity itself' (2009: 10). I have found that death stops life in its tracks. It makes future-directedness feel pointless and faith in anything up ahead seem childishly stupid. Atwood goes on: 'Where is the story? The story is in the dark ... Going into a narrative – into the narrative process – is a dark road. You can't see the way ahead' (2002: 158). As it turns out, for me, it was the process of writing, the act of sitting at my desk each day, that was important. Human life, in the living of it each day over and over, can become subjectively meaningful despite its contingency.

### **Practice-led research**

For creative writers in the academy, it is reasonable to use practice-led research (PLR) as a framework for a doctoral thesis: the artefact stimulates and motivates the theoretical inquiry. PLR is the practice of writing creatively while developing critical responses to that practice. Care is required, however. Andrew McNamara, for example, provides six rules: eliminate the first person pronoun, 'I', as a centerpiece of a research formulation; avoid recourse to one's own experience as the basis or justification of the research ambition; avoid conflating practice with research; write an abstract that encompasses one's creative practice and the exegetical component; acknowledge other research paradigms; and avoid defining PLR as more self-reflexive than other research methods (2012). At the *Creative Ecologies* workshop held in 2015 (WSU), Ivor Indyk said that

the creative work should not be taken as the exegetical subject and that the connection between the two parts should be implicit: the exegesis sets up resonances which work on the reading of the creative work.

Initially, I feel that some aspects of this kind of advice led me astray in finding a research question I wanted to spend time with. I wrote two chapters of my exegesis based on close readings of two Australian novels about death taking a philosophical approach as part of my exegetical work. I did not discuss my novel or indicate that understanding my own experiences was the research goal. I did not presume that my writing was itself research or that the philosophical approach I used to critically assess works of Australian literature was useful for explaining my own writing practice. I allowed for an implicit connection between the parts, presenting work on the writing of death in Australian literature that I hoped would set up resonances for the reading of the novel. Choosing philosophy as a research paradigm led me to pursue a Graduate Certificate in Philosophy alongside my PhD over the past two years, motivated by the feeling of fraudulence that I think is common to creative writing doctoral candidates.

According to Jen Webb who also presented at the *Creative Ecologies* workshop, PLR is a research paradigm that creative practitioners use because they are both creators and knowledge makers and there should not be a need to justify it as a methodology. Artists as researchers fail, however, 'if we fail in the production of knowledge' (WSU 2015). The question, according to Webb, is whether you have articulated your insights. Beyond this, however, is the tension between theories of PLR that have emerged from within institutional frameworks and the way in which creative practitioners usually attempt to articulate their insights. For all the exegetical artefacts already produced by creative artists and attempts by scholars in the creative writing field to negotiate the requirement their work be justified as research, some embarrassment about discussing the creative process remains. There is sometimes pressure to write a literature paper to accompany the novel and to avoid any first-person recognition that, as Paul Carter states, 'creative research is, in itself, an act of reflection and invention' (Brien 2005). The effort not to conflate practice with research might perhaps negate the very fact that in writing a novel, I reflect on how my creative thinking produces the work and what I have learnt in the process. In her review of Carter's *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (2005), Donna Lee Brien writes that Carter believes there is 'intellectual work that usually goes missing in translation' when making art and that creative research should attempt to articulate the craft wisdom of the artist.

The practice of writing about death led me towards research into Continental philosophy, which is said to have 'lodged itself in English speaking universities ... in departments of literature and social studies' (Quinton 1995: 172). Perhaps this is because of its recognition of the imaginative nature of thinking which tends to challenge the certainties of experience and the possibility of objective moral choice. Surely, the idea of reason as the 'creative exercise of intellectual imagination' (Gutting 2012) should have implications for PLR at least in raising questions about what research is for creative practitioners. This is important as the core assumptions about research from traditional institutional frameworks might have led to rules for PLR that are irrelevant for the making of exegetical artefacts about creative production.

### **Research paths: death and the sacred**

My novel, 'The Curse of Mad Gerry', is not only about a character with a terminal illness, but someone who is questioning his religious upbringing as he approaches the end of life. This meant that I felt an obligation to research death as a religious issue. Ethicist Fred Feldman who has written extensively about death from an analytic perspective says:

Whether the fear of death is rational or not, it appears that this is a fear that people have experienced throughout history. Some religious traditions seem almost to be built upon this fear, since those traditions claim that true believers will gain a chance to evade death (2010: 713-4).

Initially, I researched Australian approaches to the sacred and how this might be reflected in attitudes towards death, how Australians write about death and, hence, the claim by Antigone Kefala that Australian writers do not like the subject of death (in Mordue 2011). This claim, I felt, was related to a persistent general perception of the Australian national character as being anti-religious and having a temperament that refuses to discuss death in spiritual terms. David Tacey questions the assumption of homogeneity in Australian culture while acknowledging that there is an 'official' Australian national character enshrined in our early literary works, which he describes as 'sceptical and disbelieving, our spirit closer to existentialism than to Christianity. We hover at the edges of nihilism, refusing to take comfort from talk about other worlds, an afterlife, or heaven and hell' (2009: 49).

As I researched ideas about the sacred, I considered George Steiner's 'wager on transcendence' (1989: 4) in the arts. Art is made, Steiner contends, with the presumption of a theological, ontological or metaphysical presence, which might be God, the Platonic 'Ideas', the Aristotelian essence, Cartesian self-consciousness, the Kantian 'thing-in-itself' or noumena, or Heideggerian 'Being'. Steiner posits that art persists after the 'Death of God' because artists create as if the transcendent is a real presence, even if only a desired one in the face of a 'vivid sense of God's absence' (1989: 229).

Steiner makes a connection between, 'the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning ... the assumption of God's presence' (1989: 3) and death. Thus a response to art, generally, is a re-enactment of birth and death, coming into being and passing away, 'the two defining motions of our existential presence in the world' (1989: 209). Steiner insists that the central works of art in the West have explored the mystery of human mortality. His wager is a claim that the impetus in art is always towards making death meaningful, a desire that, he thinks, is always religious. He says that, 'The questions: "What is poetry, music, art?", "How can they not be?", "How do they act upon us and how do we interpret their action?", are, ultimately, theological questions' (1989: 227).

Bill Ashcroft also argues for a 'presence culture' which has echoes with Steiner's 'real presences' and interesting implications for the connection between death and the sacred in Australian literature:

Why it should be the task of art and literature to locate the sacred goes to the heart of the way art works in human society. In so many ways the artist and writer expose truths that they may not even personally experience, truths they are grasping for, that may only be

intimated in the horizons of imaginative language ... What we are looking at, then, in these writers, are moments of aesthetic presence in which the sacred is glimpsed outside structures of interpretation (2009: 32).

For Ashcroft, there has been a host of Australian writers including Patrick White, Francis Webb, Judith Wright, Tim Winton, David Malouf and Les Murray, who 'point the way to the sacred as a continual and imminent possibility of experience in the ordinary' (2009: 34). Ashcroft describes a Heideggerian openness to Being in the novels of Patrick White in which a simple object becomes the 'unconcealment of truth' (2009: 37), such as the silver nutmeg grater, or gob of spittle in *Tree of Man* (2009). Despite Ashcroft's use of the word sacred, a word relating to religion, his discussion of White proved a turning point for me during the research phase, a turning away from an interrogation of religious attitudes to death in Australia and towards a philosophical approach. In discussing Heidegger, Ashcroft suggests that the 'unconcealment of Being' is an experience of the 'sacredness of the ordinary – (that) occurs within Australian literature again and again over the course of the twentieth century' (2009: 36). Patrick White, for example, seeks to overcome the way in which the sacred has been confined by the structures of religion, according to Ashcroft. For Heidegger, religion seeks to enframe divinity, forcing into order something that is 'not susceptible to such control' (Richardson 2012: 341). Heidegger decided that the Western philosophical problem with God began when the Ancient Greeks decided that 'Being' was 'a Being', a God that was an objective entity who provides the meaning and purpose of human existence. The Nietzschean announcement of the 'Death of God' signaled the absence of metaphysical and epistemological foundationalism (that an objective world order or supreme Being exists beyond empirical reality). Coming into a proper relation to Being, for Heidegger, is a self-opening into the ground of self from within and thus his 'event of Being' is an unconcealment of authenticity in which we realise the truth of ourselves. Following Heidegger, I moved beyond Ashcroft's approach to the sacred in Australian literature and Steiner's wager on presence in the arts, and towards a philosophical approach and the post-religious (or, as Gianni Vattimo describes it, post-nihilistic) event of Being (Vattimo 2002).

### **Death and religion**

Nonetheless, religion persisted in my novel, perhaps because the main character is wrestling with the role it played in shaping his life. He is seeking to deliberately throw off the religious enframing of meaning as death approaches. In particular, what I noticed retrospectively was an engagement with philosophy of religion that I hadn't been at all aware of as I completed the first draft. Philosophy of religion is not concerned with religious belief and practice but rather its metaphysical truth claims. This, it seems to me, is what the character has grappled with throughout his life and must come to terms with at the end. After a Catholic upbringing, the character Gerard in my novel attends a John Mackie lecture at the University of Sydney in 1959 and is introduced to atheistic deductivism in the form of Mackie's Argument from Evil:

'The problem is this,' he wrote. 'God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There is a contradiction between these three propositions: if any two of them were

true then the third would be false. The believer must adhere to all three but cannot consistently do so' (from Davies 2000: 581, emphasis in original).

In the 1950s and 1960s, 'it appeared that there were no further defenses of theism available and no prospect of showing that religious belief could be intellectually respectable' (Duncan 2007: 24). This was not the last word, however. As Swinburne attempted to calculate the reasonableness of belief in God in terms of probability via inductivist arguments, he countered the Argument from Evil with a theodicy, considering the reasons God might be justified in permitting evil. As my character Gerard reviews the suffering and trauma of his childhood in the last months of life, he has a vision that can only be described as a theodicy:

All at once he saw himself as a small rag doll, held by the hand of God, and being shaken forcefully, violently until he saw that all his faults, his flaws, and fears were flung out of him, and he saw them drop away.

*But really, was it all necessary?*

'Of course.'

*But just to get to here? How do you know I wouldn't have gotten to this point anyway?*

'You wouldn't have given your gifts to the world'.

Post-deductivism began with the Presuppositionalism of the Protestant philosophical school:

According to this school, every philosophy is embedded in and articulates a *worldview*, a global theory or way of making sense of reality that provides the foundational perspective dictating all one's substantive beliefs. Since worldviews are global perspectives on reality, there is no more general perspective from which worldviews can be compared or criticized (Duncan 2007: 46).

Christian apologists take the view that their scripture is a presupposition which should be used to expose the flaws in other worldviews. After the vision, Gerard has a conversation with a priest in which he feels he has invoked Stan Parker's evangelist in Patrick White's *Tree of Man*. He taunts the priest, knowing that there is no possibility for the two of them to find common ground, no universal perspective from which they can discuss their differing views of God or a possible afterlife. The priest has a worldview that encompasses all that he thinks and believes; he is sure and Gerard is not. Even the vision, Gerard thinks, may be conditioned by the doxa of his Catholicism; the vision's form might only mean that he hasn't sufficiently decoded the symbolism he was indoctrinated with in childhood. He has spent years repeating his childhood prayers in order to unravel their affects. Joseph Campbell says, 'In choosing your god, you choose your way of looking at the universe' (Osbon 1991: 163). Campbell made a point of delving into the symbols of Catholicism in order to understand why he was quitting the church. You do not become mature, Campbell says, until, 'you become the authority for your own life' (Osbon 1991:162). This is also the Kantian perspective of John Hicks who argues that:

religious experiences are structured according to tradition-specific sets of religious concepts ... most believers privilege the picture of the sacred that is favoured in their

own tradition (rather than thinking of that picture as simply another way of representing an appearance of the Real) (Wynn 2008: 4).

This ends up being my character's own assessment of the phenomenology of his religious experiences. The vision leads to more questions about his childhood rather than surety about what he will be faced with after death, if anything.

### **Philosophy of death**

Early on, I rejected analytic philosophy of death in favour of continental and contemporary European approaches. Recently, I have made an effort to return to the analytic philosophy of death in order to understand my rejection of it as a framework for my critical inquiry. This tradition begins with the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus: 'So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist' (Feldman 2010: 708). The termination thesis, in which the existence of human beings ends at death, is common in philosophy because a non-physical soul that continues after death is considered problematic.

While there is no specific philosophy of death, Shelly Kagan offered a course on death at Yale for many years. In his book *Death* (2012), Kagan writes that humans have different tendencies concerning death: we deny the nature of death and instead believe in souls that have an afterlife; we respond to the fact of death by living appropriately; or we disregard death by not thinking about it at all. Kagan says death is pervasive, inevitable, varies from person to person in its timing, and is unpredictable and therefore hard to plan for. He questions whether people are afraid of the process of dying rather than being dead. Kagan believes that the idea that we die alone is a necessary truth: 'nobody else can undergo my death for me' (2012: 201) but nobody can have a haircut on your behalf either so this is merely a way of saying everyone dies. Philosophically, on the deprivation account of death, what matters now that longevity has increased over the past few hundred years is that life can be too short. Life itself has value and it is considered good to live until we are satisfied we have gotten all of the good life has to offer. Kagan also suggests that 'narrative arc' or a good versus bad story of life is important. He believes that living authentically in the face of death and living life to the fullest, being grateful for life and finding meaning in it is the proper way to live in the face of death.

Kagan's approach to death is typically analytic; it has argumentative rigour, clarity and a determination to be objective (see Quinton 1995: 31). It views experience as common-sense. Continental philosophy 'has become a name for doing exegesis on the texts of existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, or poststructuralism' (Priest 1995:173), movements with major differences. I primarily researched the existentialist tradition of writing about death, which began with Kierkegaard's perspective of experience in which the 'existing individual' accesses a 'subjective, personal dimension of human life' (Baldwin 1995: 277). In this view, reason is not regarded as 'the logical regimentation of thought but as the creative exercise of imagination' (Gutting 2012). In contrast with the clarity of writing in analytic thought, Continental writing, such as that of Heidegger, is famously obscure. It can be viewed as a form of literary expression,

and indeed many existentialists, such as Sartre, wrote novels, short stories and plays. Even when analytic philosophers deal with metaphysics, they don't read continental metaphysicians. So while Kagan raises the issue of living authentically in the face of death, he quotes Tolstoy not Nietzsche or Heidegger; he discusses depression in the face of death but neglects to mention Kierkegaard on despair or Nietzsche on nihilism; and he quotes Kafka to say the meaning of life is that it ends in death but does not discuss Heidegger's 'being-towards-death'. And, yet, Kagan's view is overwhelmingly life affirming in a way that I find Nietzschean. What draws me to Nietzsche in discussing writing about death is that the life-death-life that occurred for me did not result in the resurrection of the dead on the pages of a novel but, rather, an affirmation of life itself. In Nietzsche, suffering is not justified; life must be lived in its 'becoming', by saying yes to all of it, even if that means it is 'all woe' and contains only a 'single joy' (Kaufmann 1982: 435). Life, in other words, 'becomes', comes to be and passes away, and through this human beings 'are'.

Despite Kagan's affirmation that life has value, what the analytic view lacks is the existentialist insistence on the irreducibility of individual experience:

I am not just an example of a human being. It is not enough to identify myself as a Jew or a Londoner. As Heidegger insisted, the realisation that I must die and not just that *one* must die brings home to me my irreplaceable identity. From this results the one formal principle shared by all existentialists: the call to authenticity (Rickman 2001).

Thus I began my research into the work of existential philosophers with Soren Kierkegaard and his idea taken up by Heidegger that, 'ultimately death must not be seen as some kind of event standing before us, but rather as a way of being that, counter Epicurus, we always in some sense "are"' (Stokes and Buben 2011: 12), an obvious echo of Nietzsche. Death, for Heidegger is always relevant even when it's not actual. It shapes life in being possible at any moment:

Death – facing it – changes my relation to my other possibilities; it forces me to treat them *as* possibilities, rather than awaiting their actualizations (taking them to be all that matters). As authentic, I aim at my projects in the practical understanding that they are each exposed to this standing threat (Richardson 2012: 161).

Heidegger casts off the labels and terminology of Western philosophy that he thinks have become infected with misinterpretation, calling our human existence, 'Dasein', which literally means 'being-there'. Unlike the fixed Aristotelian substance, Dasein is both activity (hence the focus on the word 'being' as a verb), and is subject to time, changing over the course of life; unlike the Cartesian subject, it is not separated from the world, but is immersed in it as 'being-in-the-world'. Within its everyday life, Dasein chooses a way to be in each moment. Part of the ontological structure of Dasein as being-in-the-world, however, is its proneness to inauthenticity. Embedded as we become in the 'they-self,' we begin to speak about death as something objective that can happen to others. Heideggerian 'being-towards-death' is, therefore, not a way of dealing with death precisely at the point at which it becomes imminent; it is "the way in which every Dasein is *always* being-towards-death" (Richardson 2012: 148).

## Death and authenticity

I decided at this point of the research to undertake a close reading of a contemporary Australian novel in order to gauge whether Heideggerian being-towards-death had any continuing relevance. Helen Garner spoke about her novel *The Spare Room* (2008) at an author event in 2010, calling it her ‘conversation with the world about the terror of death’. The novel describes a confrontation with human mortality, in which dealing with terminal cancer causes a breakdown in the ‘everyday’ way of being-towards-death. Garner acknowledged the ‘silent power struggle’ between the dying person and her carer, and the ‘loneliness of bearing the truth’ (Garner 2010) when the dying person won’t speak about her death, which German philosopher Martin Heidegger variously calls ‘evasive concealment in the face of death’, ‘fleeing it or covering it up’ (Macquarrie and Robinson 1962: 297).

In the novel, the character of Helen prepares for a three week visit from her friend Nicola, who has cancer and needs to be nursed day and night. This ‘conversation with the world about the terror of death’ is also, according to the author, a conversation about anger, about the dying person being ‘angry to be dying’ and ‘the living person raging against the dying’ (2010). Garner says that she had to work hard to resist the urge to downplay the anger as she wrote and indeed Garner portrays the character of Helen as almost unbearably ashamed of herself: ‘I was sick with shame, raging at myself for raging, raging at death for existing, for being so slow with her and so cruel’ (2008: 194). The author was relieved when readers who had been carers thanked her for being honest about the anger but found that ‘others who haven’t had the experience found it repugnant’ and she describes the anger and helplessness as a ‘taboo subject’ (2010).

Nicola, the dying character, desperately tries to keep her impending death at arms-length, struggling to maintain what Heidegger calls ‘everyday’ or inauthentic ‘being-towards-death’. There is a sense that what is at issue for Helen is not just that her friend Nicola could be approaching the end of life; her way of living is also the problem:

I saw that I had been working towards a glorious moment of enlightenment, when Nicola would lay down her manic defences; when she would look around her, take a deep breath, and say, ‘All right. I’m going to die. I bow to it. Now I will live the rest of my life in truth’ (2008: 95).

Nicola admits that her evasiveness about the truth of her illness is because she hasn’t yet managed to make her life meaningful, something Helen denies. Heidegger says that, ‘because Dasein is *lost* in the ‘they’, it must first *find* itself. In order to find *itself* at all, it must be ‘shown’ to itself in its possible authenticity’ (Macquarrie and Robinson 1962: 313). Helen’s friend Leo warns her that perhaps Nicola is coming to her because ‘she wants you to be the one ... to tell her she’s going to die’ (Garner 2008: 9). Helen, as authentic Dasein, becomes Nicola’s voice of conscience:

‘I wanted to say this. You’re using that bloody clinic to distract yourself.’  
Like an old, tired dog she heaved up her head. ‘Don’t say it, Hel.’  
‘From what you have to do.’  
She raised one palm. ‘Don’t tell me.’  
‘You’ve got to get ready’ (2008: 140).

Of authentic Dasein, John Richardson says: ‘when I’m authentic I care especially about others’ essential end, which is to become authentic themselves. So I become their ‘conscience,’ i.e., some kind of impetus or inducement to face the basic choice of themselves’ (2012: 171).

We conceal death from ourselves because it makes life meaningless in the sense that it becomes pointless to work towards our goals. This is Heideggerian *angst*:

in anxiety the threat comes ‘from nothing and nowhere’ ... (Anxiety) is of or about a threat to our very ability to have projects ... (It) deprives *das Man* of its tranquillizing effect: the assurance that in ‘doing what one does’ I am doing what’s really worth doing (Richardson 2012: 141-2).

Known as the existential crisis, this finally arrives for Nicola when a specialist reveals that a tumour has eaten away her C7 vertebra. A breakdown in the everyday way of being-towards-death ensues: ‘All day she kept dissolving into quiet weeping ... The hard, impervious brightness was gone. Everything was fluid and melting. There was no need for me to speak. She looked up at me and said it herself ... “Death’s at the end of this, isn’t it”’ (Garner 2008: 176). This breakdown creates authenticity of Being in which physical demise is as possible as ever but the event itself loses its relevance. The timing and circumstances of death become less important than how I cope with it. Death, in its constant possibility, is a threat to the achievement of everything that I choose to undertake and yet, not only can I choose to pursue my projects anyway, the way I apply myself to a course of action, how I am in the doing of things becomes paramount. For Nicola, this is an event of Being in which she experiences the truth of herself, ‘a potent experience of illumination’ (Richardson 2012: 272).

### **Death since modernism**

Helen’s role in the novel as I have described it, however, takes the conversation about death beyond the subjective experience of anxiety of the dying character and her denial that death is approaching. What Garner describes as the conversation about anger in the novel is a confrontation with the difficulty people now experience in talking about death and dying. This difficulty, according to Norbert Elias, has occurred as a result of changing attitudes to death since modernism. There has been a ‘shift towards informality’ (2001: 27) such that the traditional way of handling death, including ritual practices, phrases and gestures have become embarrassing. People tend to be suspicious that the traditions and rituals surrounding care for the dying and mourning for the dead consist of unconvincing or feigned emotion:

The concern to avoid socially prescribed rituals and phrases increases the demands on the individual’s power of invention and expression. This task, however, is often beyond people at the current stage of civilization. The way people live together, which is fundamental to this stage, demands and produces a relatively high degree of reserve in expressing strong, spontaneous affects ... Thus, unembarrassed discourse with or to dying people, which they especially need, becomes difficult (Elias 2001: 27-8).

It is not until Helen is put under what Elias calls ‘exceptional pressure’ (2001: 27) that she is able to confront Nicola with the need to approach death authentically.

Garner's novel asks quite specific contemporary questions about the fear of death and the need to find meaning in life in the face of human finitude. Elias says that, 'people today see themselves as isolated individuals totally independent of others' (2001: 34) and Helen reflects at the start of the novel that this is the case for Nicola: 'Why hadn't someone warned me? But who? She was a free woman without husband or children. No one was in charge' (Garner 2008: 15). The problem then becomes, according to Elias, that people seek meaning for themselves alone rather than in what they mean to others. Nicola, faced with a medical system that can no longer offer her any treatment, decides to fight the prospect of death by having faith in alternative treatments. She 'won't give up' (Garner 2008: 106) she tells Helen, because she has wasted her life. Helen presents the meaning of Nicola's life as being contained in what she means to others: 'You're so dear to us' (Garner 2008: 141), 'When people are with you they feel free. Don't you know that? You think this is waste?' (144).

The approach of Elias, a sociologist, is similar to that of Shelly Kagan, an analytic philosopher: dying is hard for people who've failed to achieve their life's goal and easier for those who've fulfilled it. Primarily, however, Elias contends that the loneliness of the dying in the contemporary world is their feeling of insignificance for others. The process of dying is isolating and meaningless, 'if – still living – they are made to feel that they are already excluded from the community of the living' (2001: 66). Helen's care for Nicola and her willingness to speak openly about death brings Nicola to the truth of herself (the event of Being in Heideggerian terms). This releases Nicola to gather her many friends around her as she dies, allowing them to care for her. In the end, Helen's life is dull and boring when she's not in the presence of the dying Nicola. As Elias says: 'Death hides no secret. It opens no door. It is the end of a person. What survives is what he or she has given other people, what stays in their memory' (2001: 67). Garner's novel, then, is both a suggestion that there needs to be a recovery of the ability to speak openly with the dying about their death, and a recognition that life has meaning for the dying if *they* have meaning for other people.

## Conclusion

Writing about death as a fictive response to my experience of death and developing a critical response to death via PLR has meant an exploration of many and varied theories and philosophies. The creative practice of writing about death brought about an affirmation of the value of life in its day to day living, which echoes the 'sacredness of the ordinary' that Bill Ashcroft finds in contemporary Australian literary writing. My engagement, in writing my novel, with philosophy of religion reveals the importance, for me, in the ability to face death authentically, becoming 'the authority for your own life', as Joseph Campbell suggests and, in doing so, finding meaning outside the structures of religious interpretation. While the analytic philosophy of death also contains an affirmation of the value of human living and confirmation that living authentically in the face of death is important, it is Continental philosophy that provides more specific discussion of what authenticity entails for individuals who recognise their existence as a subjective, personal experience. Central to this is the Heideggerian event of Being in which the individual opens to the truth of themselves. I read Helen Garner's

*The Spare Room* (2008), however, not only as the disclosure of the event of Being but also as an example of the changing attitudes to death since modernism and concluded that what has become pressing in the contemporary world is the need for open communication about human mortality and an acceptance of the need for the dying to feel part of ‘the community of the living’ (Elias 2001: 66). It is undeniable, finally, that this brings me back to the experience of my father’s death. His existence has meaning for me and is the reason I began a practical and critical inquiry into death.

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