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Illumination through narrative: using writing to explore hidden life experience

The health disciplines, such as medicine, nursing and midwifery, and the disciplines of creative arts, humanities and human services are often understood as diametrically different but, despite their disparities, have much in common. One commonality is that many researchers and practitioners in each of these disciplines (and their various associated fields) are working to explore the possibilities of individuals, as well as the human condition and humanity more generally. Yet, the increasingly corporatised, managerially-driven, competitive, and economically and vocationally-focused imperatives driving the modern academy restrict opportunities for these diverse disciplines to intersect, communicate and work together on shared interests. This is especially ironic given the regular lip service paid to multi-, inter- and even transdisciplinary research, and the evidence that approaches outside of a single discipline are needed to fruitfully approach and solve complex problems (Brooks and Thistlethwaite 2012), including those in the creative or social realm (Brien and McAllister 2016).

In 2016, this line of thinking drove the organisation of a multi-disciplinary conference that explicitly targeted participating researchers from diverse disciplines. The resulting event, ‘Enlightened: narratives and narrative strategies to awaken applied and creative humanism’, was held in November 2016 in Noosa, Queensland.¹ As many of the conference papers explored the nexus between the creative and performing arts, and health and wellbeing, in such engaging and innovative ways, we believed it was important to encourage those authors to develop those works and bring them to a larger audience through publication, and this was the genesis of this special issue. The process of developing and refereeing these works provided a further opportunity for multi-disciplinary engagement and learning.

Researchers at the conference from both the creative arts (creative writing and the performing arts) and the health sciences proved to be accomplished storytellers, but it was clear, and interesting, that they were using different theoretical underpinnings and skillsets to discuss narrative and its effects. It is also not surprising that the world of personal health and health care is a rich vein for evocative stories – stories that can offer catharsis, teach lessons, bring clarity to otherwise perplexing human conditions, and build connection and community. In a world that can sometimes feel like we have ‘lost our tribe’, stories are the glue that can bring us back together. The articles in this special issue seek to both illustrate, and delve into, this potential.

Ffion Murphy's 'Writing therapy: paradox, peril and promise' opens the issue, embodying the notion that writing and healing can not only be linked, but also relate to each other dialectically. In her comprehensive article, Murphy traces the emergence of writing therapy and proposes that the study of writing in higher education could include the intriguing and challenging task of writing as therapy. Leanne Dodd's article discusses a genre popular with readers, but rarely used in writing as therapy – crime fiction. Dodd argues that while crime fiction can deepen understanding of trauma and its resolution for readers, writers can hone their craft by examining the real life of people who have experienced trauma. Contributing to this innovative discussion of creative writing, crime and trauma, Nicole Anae explores the possibility of poetry functioning as the victim impact statement (VIS), used to inform courts about the impact a crime has had on a victim. Since poetry can succinctly embody and evoke emotions that may otherwise be hidden or unspoken, it may be an effective mode for expression heretofore not appreciated.

The cathartic release that is gained by writing about one's difficult life experiences is investigated by Katie Sutherland, who argues that autoethnographic writing on misunderstood or stigmatised topics can also invite readers to gain greater clarity and even transform their thinking. As such, Sutherland provides a compelling case that self-reflexive writing can be a powerful tool for advocacy and change. Memoirs are another form of auto-ethnographic writing and, in her article, Donna Lee Brien explores an under-discussed sub-genre – narratives that focus on the everyday working life of an undertaker. Her survey of this niche category reveals their potential to give voice to topics that are socially taboo, including of course, dying and what happens next.

Another difficult social topic, and one that is predominant in true crime reporting, is domestic violence. Lauren O'Mahony and Kathryn Trees tackle this issue by exploring the accessible and often humorous romance writing of Marian Keyes. O'Mahony and Trees focus on Keyes's novel *This Charming Man*, revealing it is possible to write about challenging and entrenched cultural problems by allowing protagonists to experience turning points and healing, and suggesting how readers may benefit from reading such narratives.

Margaret McAllister explores a figure who is popular in life and fiction, but often misunderstood or poorly represented – the nurse. Drawing on Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*, McAllister reveals how one of the protagonists is a wounded healer – someone who has been hurt by the travails of life, but learned to transform that pain into greater empathy and care for others. Moving from the creative to the real world, Toby Price and Margaret McAllister explore the value of narrative in clinical practice, arguing that narrative competence, which involves knowing how to truly listen to another's story, can assist in understanding a patient's needs, and in creating an authentic therapeutic relationship. Price draws upon a personal story to describe when a nurse can flounder and disappoint, but that by understanding and applying story theory, practice can be improved. Louise Byrne also draws upon personal stories in health care, this time from the patient's perspective, to reveal insights about the lived experience of suffering and healing. This piece, a reworking of her powerful keynote address that told her own story through song, film and oral

testimony, demonstrates how emotion, struggle, and transcendence were part of her illness-recovery journey.

These themes are also elaborated in a number of creative works. Heather Taylor Johnson's *Semantics* explores Meniere's disease (a chronic illness stemming from faulty mechanisms of the inner ear), in the process suggesting why the poetic is suited to illness narratives. Milissa Deitz's *All the tiny boxes* constructs a narrative of Bakhtinian multivocality to illustrate how the need to tell stories, in the quest to find meaning, is particularly relevant to the study of grief. Eugen Bacon's *Segomotsi* also stems from the writer's grief-work, and posits that, in grief narratives, there is no clean separation of author and reader. These three creative works draw on auto-ethnographical approaches in their research and construction. Following *TEXT* style, all include research statements instead of abstracts.

Colleen Ryan, Penny Heidke, Nicole Blunt, Moira Williamson and Donna Lee Brien's article on a strategy to harness the power of blogging in higher education assessment items also references autoethnography, but in this case, relates to how this form of reflective writing can be cathartic and trigger reflection and transformation. Judith Brown discusses using autoethnographic narrative as a way of understanding collaborative performance and, especially as a tool by which the researcher can study their personal practice in relation to that of others. The editors believe the findings of this case study could have wide application in the creative arts. Gail Crimmins' article discusses the potential of using theatrically performed narrative data in research, in particular, how verbatim theatre was used to share the stories of women casual academics, and the response this drew from the audience. Debra Phillips and Elaine Lindsay's piece, 'A narrative of radical courage', brings this issues to a close. In its consideration of the use of diary entries as primary source material in auto-ethnographic research, it illustrates many of the themes of this special issue.

We hope you will agree that this special issue reveals that narrative – and its writing and study – has great reach and potential. We would like to thank all the reviewers for articles in this issue for their input, and the authors for their engagement with the reviewing process. We would also like to acknowledge that many more articles were received for consideration than could fit, or fit into, this issue, and hope that such themes can be explored in future issues of *TEXT*.

Endnote

1. Two keynote addresses were funded through a small grant from the Women's Academic Fund, Accelerate Queensland grants program.

Works cited

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Professor Margaret McAllister (CMHN, RN, BA, MEd, EdD) is Professor of Nursing at Central Queensland University, in Noosa, Australia. She is an award-winning educator and is experienced in working across disciplines. Her research and teaching focus includes narratives of health and wellbeing, mental health promotion, and transformative learning. She has co-authored several books focused on narrative in nursing: The Clinical Helper (2013), Stories in Mental Health (2013), The Resilient Nurse (2011) and Solution Focused Nursing (2007).

Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, in Noosa, Australia. Founding convenor of the Australasian Death Studies Network (ADSN), Donna ran the ADSN's inaugural conference in 2015, and its second conference in 2016. Donna sits on the Editorial Advisory Boards of TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing and the Australasian Journal of Popular Culture, and is a Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. Since the 1990s, Donna's research has focused on genres of creative non-fiction.

Leanne Dodd has qualifications in arts, education, training, mental health and communications, and is a doctoral candidate at Central Queensland University, researching the transformative potential of creative writing. Under the pen name of Lea Scott, she has published three crime novels and facilitated writing workshops throughout Queensland. Leanne serves as Vice Chair of the Queensland Writers Centre and is an appointed mentor for emerging crime writers. This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.