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Writing death and dying

In October 2016, the editor of this Special Issue convened the second Australasian Death Studies Network (ADSN) conference in Noosa, Queensland. This event gathered a significant number of scholars and creative practitioners who were interested in exploring the symbolic and representational possibilities of the processes of death and dying. Following on from the first multi-disciplinary conference that established the ADSN the year before, this conference continued discussion and investigation into a range of cultural, humanities and social areas that conduct research into death and dying, including the creative arts, popular culture and health. There was a very strong representation of creative writers and creative writing researchers interested in these topics. These scholars and creative practitioners explored a wide range of topics including: representations of death and dying in literature, visual art and the media, music and various types of popular culture; Gothic representations of death, dying and the undead; and writing about death and dying across cultures and historical periods. Writing about gender, aging and trauma in relation to death and dying were also discussed, as were transgression, murder and crime fiction. The keynote address, 'A day in the life of a funeral director', was not only a highlight of the conference, but provided a heady measure of realism to the deliberations.

This Special Issue of *TEXT* represents a selection of these writers and their writing-related papers, developed for publication and double blind peer reviewed. A number of themes including writerly responses to death, writing about mourning and loss, and the ethics of writing about this content recur through many of these articles.

Rachel Spencer's 'Dignifying the poisoned chalice: the ethical challenges of using archival material in a narrative about death and arsenic' opens the issue by considering how the author, who is a lawyer, is approaching writing the story of Emily Perry, who was tried in the Supreme Court of South Australia in 1981 for the attempted murder of her husband by arsenic poisoning. This article explores aspects of the true crime writing process, and especially in relation to utilising original archival material including photographs. Spencer also, fascinatingly, reflects on what this professional orientation means in terms of the construction of her narrative of crime and legal history. Sue Bond's 'Speaking through the things of their lives: writing a memoir with my parents' melancholy objects' also deals with writing about others. In this case, Bond relates how, in the process of writing a memoir about living with her adoptive parents, she has had to reconstruct their lives through the objects and things that they left behind after their deaths. In this article, Bond refers to a series of letters, documents and other objects and

how these objects became foundational in the writing of her memoir. Rachel Franks' 'Writing the death of Joseph Luker: true crime reportage in colonial Sydney' picks up on aspects of both Spencer's and Bond's discussions. Moving further back into the past, Franks dissects the reporting of one particular early crime and its associated deaths in colonial Australia. This article both highlights several rarely discussed tensions within the genre of true crime, and provides an illuminating discussion of the news media and its writers then operating and how they wrote about his event.

Elizabeth Ellison's 'Facing death on the Australian beach: examining fear and transcendence' focuses on an iconic component of the Australian landscape – the beach – to examine how Australian writers of the beach portray death. Classic texts like Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) are discussed alongside more contemporary texts including Fiona Capp's *Night Surfing* (1996), Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001) and Romy Ash's *Floundering* (2012), as well as films such as *Blackrock* (1997) and *Newcastle* (2008).

Margaret McAllister and Donna Lee Brien's 'Death, nursing and writing ambiguous characters' looks at writing about death and dying from the perspective of inventing a character and, specifically in this case in relation to an occupation that deals with this on a daily basis: palliative care. Investigating a character who defies stereotypes in Michel Franco's film, *Chronic* (2015), a nurse who works in home-based palliative care, this article provides a case study of writing characters against powerful stereotypes. Lauren O'Mahony's 'Death and the Australian rural romance novel' looks at another literary form rich with death imagery – in this situation, examining the representation of death in selected contemporary Australian rural romance novels. O'Mahony persuasively argues that representations of environmental, animal and human deaths frequently appear in rural romances, noting that many rural romance novels conjure existential realities that reinforce how death is a vital part of the cycle of life.

Kathryn Trees' 'Response and response-ability to the death of others who are vulnerable' discusses the shocking real-world events and images that influence our daily interactions with vulnerable others who are unknown to us. Trees argues that writers, especially, have an ethical obligation to respond to such events, and to facilitate such responses in both oneself and others through writing. By taking Trees' own witnessing of a young man who died while train-surfing as an example of an event that demands response, Trees persuasively suggests how writing can be a profoundly ethical response to such events. Gail Pittaway's 'Food for finality: feeding the bereaved and "feasting" the dead' describes another response to death: the sharing of foods and/or drinks. This wide-ranging article considers some mythological and religious sources for connections between food and death, as well as a cross section of New Zealand ethnic cultures – Māori, Pakeha (European), Pacific and Asian – to reflect on the symbolism and customs that are involved in the sharing of, or abstinence from, food, when commemorating the dead.

Matt Eliot's 'The white lady of mourning: glamour, power and a woman's understanding' discusses how rhetoric can serve as a useful tool in the creative writing process, providing – as it can – insights into the construction of cultural meanings.

Using the tools of visual rhetoric, this article explores one Australian funeral company's use of marketing images that consciously subvert the traditionally gendered depiction of funerals and mourning. In the process, the analysis reveals how such visual rhetoric can serve as a useful tool for the creative writing process. Using the example of music writing, Martin Lodge's 'Illuminations: a proposed taxonomy for death-inspired works in Western art music' charts both how death has not only been a major stimulus for a specific type of writer – the composer – and how it continues to be so for contemporary musicians. While composers' responses to death have been predominantly associated with emotions of grief, sadness and loss, Lodge's examination of the Western art music repertoire of the past five hundred years reveals a diversity of reactions from mourning through prophetic imaginings to resignation, as well as spiritual affirmation and the theological affirmation of an afterlife.

The Special Issue includes a complement of compelling creative works exploring this theme of writing about death and dying, a topic which has inspired creative artists for centuries. Each of these is accompanied by a research statement, outlining the relevant research background, contribution and significance, as required by the Australian academic research evaluation system.

Bambi Ward's 'The role of narrative in easing pain: blurred roles of health professional and carer' reveals how written narrative can be a helpful tool for a health professional dealing with grief over a family member's illness and death, even if the event written about occurred years before. This narrative provides a creative case study written from the perspective of both daughter and medical practitioner, illustrating how writing about the grief and loss was cathartic and helped resolve longstanding feelings of anger, helplessness and grief. This supports research about the role of narrative in such healing.

Julia Prendergast's 'A wake' is a story about the unearthing of a grave and an overdue wake. In this, readers can see how the author's experience of ideasthesia provides a means for understanding the writing process: a way of deconstructing how writers sense concepts and ideas in metaphorical, associative and sensory ways. This moving story represents work towards Prendergast's manuscript 'The earth does not get fat'.

Lynda Hawryluk's poem 'Blue berries' is informed by research into Australian coastal Gothic writing, which continues the tradition of colonial narratives focused on hostile landscapes. Hawryluk's image of quondong berries lying in a bed of littoral remnant rainforest in the Northern Rivers region of northern New South Wales evokes, for the author, the appearance of an elderly person's eyes as they enter the liminal space between life and death, and providing a rich seam of poetic imagery.

Gail Pittaway's poem 'Interislander' alludes to the figure of The Ferryman (sometimes named Charon) who ferries the souls of the dead across the River Styx to the shores of Hades. This poem uses allusion, association and pun to locate the commonplace concept of death as a journey in a specific geographical setting; a ferry ride between two islands, and employs a grammatical pun on the official name of the regular ferry between the North and South Islands of New Zealand – as 'inter' operates both as a prefix meaning 'between' and an active verb.

Leanne Dodd's 'Ebb and flow' from her novel-in-progress closes the issue. This narrative is based on research that aims to better represent the complexity of traumatic images and sensations in crime fiction by drawing upon elements in trauma narratives. In incorporating elements of trauma narrative into this crime fiction story, Dodd develops a narrative structure that mimics traumatic memory using repetition, fragmentation and cuts in perspective and time.

In putting this Special Issue together, I was assisted by a number of individuals. The peer reviewers of each article engaged perceptively and generously with the works they reviewed, while the authors were all creatively responsive regarding these reports and any editorial queries and requirements. In terms of editing this Special Issue, I have been fortunate indeed. An editing intern who has been working with me in 2017, Ms Virginia Birt, read and worked through the issue with an eagle eye and editorial flair – displaying an advanced ability to ask questions that authors could respond to, without being overbearing or egocentric – that I remain in awe of. I also provided a number of articles to Dr. Dallas Baker's editing students who worked diligently on this task, and provided a professional level of editing on these articles. Thank you to Jane Atkinson, Alix Kwan, Kerrie Le Lievre and Saira Manns, and Dallas for organising this productive and instructive opportunity for us all. Add to this, Dr. Ross Watkins – who as one of the two Commissioning editors for *TEXT* Special Issues – also assisted in pointing out any final editorial errors or inconsistencies. (Any remaining errors are, of course, my ultimate responsibility as editor.) Finally, a warm thank you to Professor Nigel Krauth, who as the chief editor of *TEXT*, always ensures that all issues are not only up to *TEXT*'s exacting standards, but meet the needs of our readers.

Donna lee Brien, BEd, GCHE, MA(Prelim), MA, PhD, is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, Australia. Founding convenor of the Australasian Death Studies Network (ADSN), Donna has convened ADSN conferences in 2015 and 2016, The next conference of the Network will be in 2018. Donna's research focuses on writing and researching sub-genres of non-fiction writing. Her interest in writing about death comes from over two decades of teaching, supervising and researching creative writing, including memoirs and other auto/biographical narratives about death, dying and mourning. She has also presented at national on international conferences, and published, on how to teach creative writing students about how to write about death and dying, as well as reading the significance and meaning of the international phenomenon of roadside memorials and shrines. She is also the co-editor of another TEXT Special issue on writing about death and dying, Special issue no. 35, Writing Death and the Gothic, October 2016, editing with Lorna Piatti-Farnell, at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue35/content.htm>