

Griffith University

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Politics / creative writing / identity / memoir

Biographical Note:

Nigel Krauth is Professor and head of the writing program at Griffith University. He has published novels, stories, essays, articles and reviews. His research investigates creative writing processes and the teaching of creative writing. He is the General Editor of *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses*. His most recent book is *Creative Writing and the Radical* (MLM 2016).

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Taking a side

When I think about it, I first took a side on creative writing politics in a forum at the University of Papua New Guinea in the 1970s, at an event leading up to the country's Independence. The issue at stake: the influence of Western-style education on the locals. A lecture theatre full of energised white educators debated vigorously and, in the mix, decided to bag my English department boss Ulli Beier on account of the activist publishing he encouraged among students. He erred, apparently, in facilitating the publication of radical works by undergraduates and Masters candidates. We did not know at the time that four of those young writers were destined for leadership: two would become prime ministers, one the governor-general, and another, premier of a province.

Merely a tutor in the university, I did not speak up in that forum. But I came away from the debate with a new sense of myself, politically. I was on the side of creative writing, its political power, its hope, and its deep honesty.

Bandaged head

After I won the Vogel award, the Canberra Writers Festival invited me to perform. On the day of my speech, I poured tomato sauce into a wad of cotton wool, pressed it against my temple, and wrapped a long bandage around my head. I looked in the mirror and found the effect worked well. The speech I prepared focused on the harm a novelist does to himself in writing a novel. The bandage provided a metaphor, of course, but I intended to explain it as the result of car accident en route to the festival.

On the outdoor podium I sat next to Elizabeth Jolley. The Canberra sun blazed on proceedings. Elizabeth leant over to me and said, in such a kind voice: ‘Does the sun hurt your head, dear?’

She worked as a nurse before becoming a famous writer, and her novels astonish with their empathy. But I had not thought anyone would take my role-play for real. I felt myself a total imposter as I stood to read my speech.

The idea of commitment

At the Adelaide Writers Festival, the committee provided my accommodation. I did not know until then that hotels had underground rooms, but Tim Winton, myself, and other writers stayed in windowless below-ground spaces while our publishers and editors enjoyed the heights of the penthouses. Those old days have gone, of course, when publishers did everything for the writer: wrote their blurbs, designed their covers, edited their sentences beyond recognition, etc. That was the publisher’s burden then, servicing the subaltern writer before the advent of the internet where, now, the writer does everything for the publisher.

Anyhow, late one night, Tim and I decided to go out on the town. Far along the city’s main street, beyond the crowds and bright lights, we ran into an altercation: four substantial, suited men beating up a skinny indigenous fella against a shop front window. The suited men’s partners, handbags over arms, stood in line further on, waiting for the fracas to finish.

My response? We should cross the street immediately and avoid the scenario. Tim’s response? Walk up to the melee and give them the benefit of his insight.

‘What do you guys think you are doing?’ Tim said, interrupting the punch-up.

One suit turned on him. ‘Keep out of it,’ he warned. ‘We’re off-duty cops.’

I decided then that I *really* wanted to cross to the other side of the road. It wasn’t just an unfair stoush, it was a cultural / political / illegal / police-work stoush.

‘Well,’ Tim said, ‘my father is a member of the Police Review Board...’

A pause. The battered indigenous fella uncrumpled himself, and scampered up the street. The suited cops checked their coat-sleeves and tie-knots. The hand-bagged women stopped looking abandoned and moved forward. The whole scene dissolved.

Tim and I walked on. I have no idea what we did later that night. In awe of my colleague in bib-and-brace overalls with a ponytail down to his bum, I saw not just a real writer, but a real man.

Island

In the 1980s I published a piece in *Island* magazine about the consequences of fiction. It worked through my realisation that fiction does indeed have consequences – because life has consequences. Fiction writers can’t just write anything and get away with it. Even fantasising has consequences.

At the time, I did not grasp the significance of the magazine’s title. As John Donne said: ‘No man [person] is an island.’ As writer, I had the power to hurt others, even in fiction, including those I loved. The point about *Island* magazine, I realised, was that it spoke for those beyond the island also.

In my article I used images of the fictional thief stealing the fictional prize jewel, and the fictional virgin fictionally deflowered. I proposed the question: How could my

fiction be fact? But Donne was right. You may write from your viewpoint, but you implicate all others.

The unit of politics

On one occasion, upon hearing back from my publisher that he would not publish my next novel manuscript, I hurled the ream of pages into the paddock adjacent to my writing caravan. I propelled them in anger and desperation among the cows and dung.

Subsequently I found, in my writing life, that I would produce a publishable work every *second* time around. Between each published novel, I wrote a manuscript that didn't cut it. Each failed attempt rehearsed the successful one.

The unit of politics is the ability of one person to convince another to do something.

In figuring for ourselves, as writers, what matters and what doesn't, we note the views of lovers, friends, editors, publishers, reviewers, buyers, critics, fans. In the past, writers said whatever they liked from their garrets, and often came unstuck. Now, there are multiple points at which a writer reacts to the paratext. Today the reader sits opposite at the desk, a click away. The cows don't come into the equation.

Opening night of *Muse of Fire*

I wrote a play for the South Australian Theatre Company, *Muse of Fire*. The SATC was an ensemble group, they needed plays with parts for a cast of 12 or more. We workshopped my draft with the actors and director, and the production went ahead. The play responded to Shakespeare's idea, in *Henry V*, that the audience provides the generative power to make a performance credible. 'Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts,' the Chorus – a sort of 16th century actors' representative – cajoled the Elizabethan audience. 'And make imaginary puissance.' In other words, Will recognised the essential politics of theatre.

On opening night, I had dinner with the Premier of South Australia, who was also the Minister for the Arts. Dining with us: the Solicitor-General of South Australia (the Chair of the SATC), the Artistic Director of the Company, and our partners. A cordial gathering ensued, and we moved on to the theatre to greet the cast and watch the initial performance.

Opening night went well. One of the lead actors had broken his leg during rehearsals, but it fitted with his role and we enjoyed telling him to 'break a leg.' A full house watched as the theatre burned down (part of the script) and was resurrected. After the performance, cast, admin and VIPs moved on for the after-party.

In the Adelaide night club where we gathered, more fake smoke assailed us than at the performance. I remember the Solicitor-General of South Australia emerged from the haze and said to me, as he swirled past: 'You will receive more criticism for this play than you deserve.' Then he dissolved into a cloud.

At 3am downtown in the Adelaide chill, the Artistic Director and I waited at the loading dock of the *Adelaide Advertiser* for the first copies of the newspaper to arrive down the chute. We opened the pages and saw it – a bad review. But worse than that, it linked to a front-page picture of the Premier sitting in an empty theatre. The political forces against the Premier, intent on using his portfolio as Arts minister to undermine him, reported my play's full-house spectacle as a no show.

Word length at national level

In the final judges' meeting of the prize, we decided the winning manuscript. Our chosen writer would receive a large amount of money, publication, and fame. We looked at each other, and smiled. We had done our judging job. Then someone said: 'What about the word length?'

We went to work, using various individual methods to measure the manuscript. Some came up with a figure above the required cut-off, others below it. We decided to make a phone call. At the other end of the line, the surprised entrant said: 'Yes, maybe a hundred words below the requirement.'

If the judges of a competition ever ring you and ask about word length, always say: 'Perfectly fine, according to my calculations.'

I launch *The Hand That Signed the Paper*

Helen Demidenko's novel won the *Australian/Vogel* literary award and her publishers asked me to launch the book in Brisbane. To a full hall, I delivered my honest reading of the work. I said I thought it brilliant, as the judges clearly had done too. For me, the brilliance lay in the way this novel about Ukrainians and Germans caused me as reader to feel implicated in the worst horror in history. Previously I had thought the Holocaust something foreign, something past, perpetrated by others, not me. But Helen's work made me realise that humans doing horror to each other connects to me. What any human does reflects us all.

After my speech and Helen's speech following – for which she had dressed in Ukrainian national costume – and after the book signings, I looked around to gather an after-party together. But I couldn't see Helen. I could hear (we could all hear) a dramatic argument going on in the back room of the hall. Sadly, I thought, Helen was having a stoush with her boyfriend over some aspect of the evening's proceedings. What an unfortunate time to have a relationship row, I thought.

Wrong! Apparently, the argument we heard that night indicated the first occasion where the Ukrainian community spoke out against Helen's appropriation of their culture's viewpoint and experiences.

The Demidenko Affair highlighted for me the difficulty a fiction writer confronts in exploring a territory beyond the constituency inferred from the limits of their apparent background. Helen dramatically inserted herself across borders, and was arrested.

Law suits

Two of my novels led to threatened law suits. With one of them, the Banjo Paterson estate took exception to me saying certain things about the great Australian poet – things said by others but denied by his grand-nieces, their source being talks he gave them when they sat on his knee as 10- and 12-year-olds, long after the 1890s. To avoid the suit, I deleted words.

Then later, with my third novel, a wonderful hotel – wicked weekend venue for gay lovers in the 1980s – objected to me saying in fiction that a man dying of AIDS might go there to make the best of his final days. To avoid the suit, I added a notice to readers – words in praise of the hotel – pasted by the publisher on the inside cover of all copies.

In my writing career, I developed the notion that anything I really wanted to write about would cause offense somewhere: at a national, local or family level. Whatever I investigated – history, lifestyles, relationships – a price needed paying if I told reality as I saw it.

Rat-trap

I was invited by the journal *Australian Literary Studies* to talk about writing. The event took place in Brisbane. I decided that my speech would involve props. Among other amusements, I had a paperback book so badly bound it sprayed pages into the audience upon opening. Also, I had a rat-trap that I set on a desk in full view when I began the speech.

Some people fear rat-traps. If you set one in their presence they freak. I like setting rat-traps and I enjoyed the tension I created until the moment in my speech when I really wanted to make my point.

I hit the trap with a ruler and it jumped with a massive snap that galvanised the room.

A bull-dust covered bottle with a marble in its neck

In this memoir, I have used up already my best memory fragments pertinent to the topic of politics, creative writing and identity. I have come almost to the end of my snapshot album.

But I do recall also, that in researching my novel *Matilda, My Darling*, I went to the site of the 1890s shearers' strike camp – beyond Winton, in Central Western Queensland – and found, exposed on the desert ground, among stones which still outlined tent sites where the strikers pitched their shelters, a dusty broken bottle with a marble in its neck.

In history, this camp ground defined the politics we have in Australia today. Those Queensland shearers' strikes led to the creation of our major political parties and the conflicts we continue to vote on. Had I not been a writer, I would not have gone exploring there. I would not have seen the significance of the marble in the neck of the broken bottle.

The bottle sat on my writing desk, bull-dust covered, for many years. I don't know where it is now, I have lost it along the way, but it will always mean politics and creative writing for me. In such a bottle, something forceful bubbles up from below, and you just have to tip the perspective and suck on it.

Research statement

Research background

The fragmented narrative genre dates back at least to Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book* and other Japanese *zuihitsu* produced in the years 1000-1200 (McKinney 2006: ix-xxix). McKinney describes *The Pillow Book* as 'a genre-bending miscellany' of short pieces: 'The original text seems to have been written ... as a seamless flow, very like the flow of consciousness that results from keeping a continuous journal of spontaneous thoughts' (McKinney 2007). Walter Benjamin refined the genre for the modern period in *One Way Street* (1928). His fragmented narrative incorporated a collection of his feuilleton pieces – short political fragments – originally written for German newspapers and magazines (Eiland & Jennings 2014: 258).

Research contribution

My fragmented memoir gathers memories from my writing career which were particularly political in nature and had an effect on my developing sense of identity as a writer. Were there intelligently-edited newspapers willing to publish such fragments, I feel these pieces could be published, as Benjamin's were, due to their political content.

Research significance

None of these events has been previously recorded. Or else, there has been record of them quite different from how I portray them. It is hard to define 'research significance' in memoir without waxing egotistical but, upon consideration, as an academic now, I analyse that the real-life moments included here were important in relation to the Australian creative writing context in which I worked at the time.

Works cited

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