

Victoria University

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Women walking: fragments

Biographical note:

Enza Gandolfo is the author of many published short pieces of fiction and non-fiction, as well as the recipient of several grants and awards, including a Varuna Fellowship. Her novel, *Swimming* was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award 2010 and ABC Fiction Award 2008. Her previous books include: *Inventory: on op shops* with Sue Dodd (Vulgar Press 2007) and *It keeps me sane: women craft wellbeing* with Marty Grace (Vulgar Press 2009). Enza has a PhD in Creative Writing and is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the School of Communication and the Arts at Victoria University. She is a co-editor of *TEXT*.

Keywords:

fiction – women – *flâneur/flâneuse*

Preamble to *Women walking: fragments*

Women walking: fragments are three short sections that were written in the early stages of the work on my current novel, a work-in-progress, tentatively titled, *The Fallen*. The initial motivating questions for the novel arose from a desire to explore the experience of culpability and the possibility of redemption, but I was also very interested in women's place in the contemporary city (the novel is set in Melbourne and the western suburbs) and the relationship between walking, place and memory. I was influenced by the works of writers such as Charles Baudelaire (1888), Edgar Allan Poe (2004) and Virginia Woolf, in particular her short story 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (2008) and her novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1950), theorists such as Walter Benjamin (1999), Susan Buck-Morss (1986, 1989), Janet Wolff (1985, 2000) and Deborah Parsons (2000), and the figure of the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse*.

In the ERA 2009, Victoria University was given a rating of 3 in the 1904 code. Like many creative arts academics in universities across Australia, who were rated at 3 or 4 in their respective codes, we celebrated this recognition even as we questioned the system and process on which it was based. Since then the pressure has been on us to maintain or better that result in ERA 2012. This requires a balance of both scholarly and creative outputs. Conscious that I needed to produce scholarly as well as creative work, I undertook substantial 'scholarly' research on the encounters between women and the city alongside work on the novel.

The City of Melbourne awarded me a small grant to work on this project. This included working on the novel, producing a blog (Gandolfo), several short creative pieces for a reading at Federation Square (including an earlier version of one of the *Women walking: fragments*) and an essay that is currently under consideration for publication. The more scholarly research on walking, on the *flâneur/flâneuse*, on the woman in the city, also made an appearance as part of my research plans for that year and my Special Studies Program application.

However, while the research was (and continues to be) of interest the novel has taken a different direction. The key female character, Jo, has done less and less walking and moved away from the city and into the suburbs. It is unlikely that walking, and especially walking the city, will be part of her journey to redemption – though at this stage I am not even sure redemption is possible for Jo.

In my experience both with this current novel (in progress) and with my previous creative writing projects, the work develops and takes on directions, through the process of writing, that in the initial stages, the writer cannot envisage. Because I am in a research environment in Higher Education, I talked and wrote about my research, and those who heard me read and present continue to refer to the 'walking novel' and the '*flâneur* novel' when they ask me about the progress of my writing, but the novel has moved on and is much more about falling than walking.

If I was a writer writing outside of the Higher Education context, this would not be an issue at all. All writers do a great deal of reading and research as part of the creative practice of writing, and not all of that work ends up being used or useful. As a writer outside of Higher Education context, it is unlikely that I would have talked publicly about this research at such an early stage in the project.

In addition, as a writer in Higher Education, with obligations to publish scholarly work, I took this research further than I might have otherwise. In the end, however, I have decided that the novel is my primary focus and that I want to allow the novel to develop through the practice of writing rather than to be led by research. So while I have not completely abandoned my interest in walking, women in the city, or the *flâneur*, I have stopped trying to force the exploration those ideas within and through the novel.

I supervise HDR students and ask them to do candidature proposals (as required by the University) outlining what they are going to explore in their creative work, that in many cases they have not yet started. My experience with this project raises yet again questions about the suitability of this very science based approach in the arts. It has also raised a number of other issues for me: one is about the time I have to work on my creative writing and on my research and how I balance this to ensure that my first priority is the creative writing. The second is about how much to allow the research imperatives of the university to impact on my creative work.

I do not regret my reading about walking, about women and the city, about the *flâneur/flâneuse*; it has been interesting and thought provoking and I may follow it up in some other project in some other time. For now there appears to be no ‘walking novel’, and sections like – *Women walking: fragments* – have, for now, been shifted out of the novel file. Whether they make it back in or not, I will only discover by writing the novel.

Women walking: fragments

Sarah

It is just after sunset and the streets are full of people when Sarah turns into Flinders Street and heads down towards the station. In Fed Square, there is a band playing. People are sitting on the steps and standing in groups all the way up to the stage. Sarah crosses Swanston Street, walks past *Young and Jackson* and heads down to Elizabeth Street. Outside a takeaway shop, two boys stand smoking and drinking.

‘Look at that fat lump,’ one boy says, ‘she’s bigger than your sister.’

‘Shut the fuck up about my sister, arsehole.’ Both boys laugh. They are skinny boys and in their tight black jeans their legs look twig thin. Sarah walks faster.

‘Hey you,’ the boy with the sister shouts. ‘You should try going on the *Biggest Loser*.’

‘Hey loser,’ the other one screams. ‘They’d probably reject you ‘cause you’re so ugly.’

They laugh again.

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Sarah

Sarah loves to walk but she's a faller. Raised footpaths, cracked bitumen, loose gravel, potholes, often catch Sarah unawares and she tends to trip, slip, spill, falling to the ground. She misses steps and fails to take gutters into account. Cobblestones, slate, any uneven ground and her ankles twist.

Weak foundations.

It isn't a chronic condition but it requires attention. She has to watch her step.

Over the years, she's had a series of scraped knees and sprained ankles, bruised arms and hands. She's split her lip, cracked a couple of teeth and broken her left arm in two places. As a result, a fear of falling, a foreboding accompanies Sarah on all her walks.

When she was a child, these falls drove her mother mad. Netballer. Runner. A woman with good balance, she could not understand Sarah's lack of it.

'You don't take after me or your father.' This was one of the few times Sarah heard her mother say anything positive about my father. 'When he was young he could run so fast that everyone wanted him on their team.'

'Watch your feet,' was Sarah's grandmother's advice. She was a faller too.

'Don't be silly, only old people walk with their heads down watching their toes. Young people should run like the wind.'

It was the blood that bothered Sarah's mother most of all. Sarah arriving home with blood dripping down her leg or her arm; her skin stained with dry blood. Her clothes torn.

'Not again.'

'It's not my fault. It was an accident.'

There were always stores of Dettol in the bathroom cupboard. Cotton buds and hot water. The sting of being careless, of taking after her grandmother.

Sarah walks with too careful a step for a woman her age. She watches her feet. Walking this way it is possible to cover kilometres and see nothing. Nothing but the cracks and stains on the bitumen. Nothing but the litter, cigarette butts and lolly wrappers. Sometimes walking is almost impossible; a stone, the raised edge of a path... and the possibility of falling rises like a fever, like a blush, like a panic...

When Sarah walks, she sees only what is caught by her peripheral vision; in side glances. Looking up only momentarily, in reaction to a car horn or a scream or the feel of someone coming too close. *Obese woman walking.*

She says: *there should be a neon sign above my head so people know to avoid me.*

Even so she walks every day, but she doesn't lose weight.

'You're too slow,' her mother says. 'You need to walk with purpose.'

She doesn't powerwalk like the other women she sees, their striding makes her wince. She does wear runners and sometimes she takes the iPod. But no matter what she does, she never looks like them. She walks because walking is how she lives; how she thinks; how she finds her way around life, around herself. If she doesn't walk, she gets depressed. Her apartment is two rooms and a narrow balcony. She could hardly turn around on that balcony. But when she is home this is where she spends most of her time – watching people.

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Jo

As I walk through the turnstiles, I notice the flower seller. I stop and take a deep breath but I can't smell the flowers, their scent is lost among stronger smells – perspiration and perfume, hot chips and Spanish churros. It's their colours that stand out – splashes of pink, red and yellow – and blue – the iris, with its yellow tongue was Ash's mother's favourite. Whenever we came back through Flinders Street, she would buy flowers. Sometimes two or three bunches.

Ash hated sitting on the train with her mother, with the flowers, with her mother talking about the flowers, with her mother taking up an extra seat with the flowers, and especially on the busy trains when people were prepared to kill for a seat. Ash would roll her eyes, and then she and I would whisper, so her mother could not hear our conversations. We made sure to leave her out.

I make my way down the station steps. I look across to St Paul's Cathedral. I stare at the crowds – standing at the lights waiting to cross Flinders, waiting to cross Swanston. Standing at the tram stop. Walking up and down the steps; walking along the path in front of *Young and Jackson*.

Ash and I went into *Young and Jackson* once. We went in with a guy we'd met only moments earlier on the tram. You know, one of *those* guys who thinks he's good looking and can get any girl. We were bored. And under age. But we didn't look it. He said, *I'm here on holidays and don't know anyone – can I buy you a drink?*

We said, *yes*.

And all three of us got off the tram and headed for the pub.

Ash said she'd show him *a real piece of Melbourne history* – she told him about the painting of the naked Chloe. The bloke, whose name I can't remember, was excited. Two young girls, a painting of a naked woman and a beer.

The publican took one look at us and asked for ID. We ran out of the pub, across the road, into the station and onto the train, laughing all the way.

I catch myself smiling.

And then the smile slips.

I join the crowd waiting to cross Flinders. In front of me a group of school boys carry heavy packs, and talk about the soccer. I walk across Flinders Street and then turn left. Past the pub, past *Dangerfield* with its gothic outfits in the window, past *Flora* and the smell of hot curries, past the second hand book shop and into Degraives. Cafes

line both sides of this laneway and tables take up the centre. I am transported back. Back to another Degraeves Street. Smoking cigarettes in school uniform. Brazen girls with too much time on our hands.

And then... I think I see Ash. Ash swinging her rucksack over her shoulder. Her hair nothing-brown tied in a ponytail, low and loose. A cigarette in her hand...

I follow her. Desperate to see her face, I walk as fast as I can. Wishing she would turn around. Praying she can hear my thoughts... praying it really is her... I follow her into Flinders Lane, past offices, boutiques and more cafes. Past students standing in doorways, and on footpaths smoking; past men in suits walking and talking into mobile phones; past shoppers carrying name brand bags; past young people in neat in office attire; past young people dressed all in black with multiple piercings. There are cars and taxis, and everyone is going somewhere. It is crowded. I keep bumping into people. A man says, *look where you're going*. I stop, say, *sorry*. When I turn around she has disappeared – one moment of looking away and she is gone and out of sight.

I stand on the corner of Flinders Lane and Elizabeth Street. To the left I can see as far as the station, to the right down the long stretch of Elizabeth. I have no idea where to go. I want to go back. If I go back far enough, I think I can change everything. Back to my birth in a hospital in Footscray, where the baby is not a caesarean born to a woman married to a man she hates. Back to primary school in Yarraville and to the first day when two mothers watch their daughters resist the urge to become each other's first best friends. Back to Flinders Lane, to an afternoon not spent eating too much cake, not coming home with cream stains on a new dress, not lying next to my best friend, not telling each other stories of an adult life lived together.

Ash's grandmother, used to say that wishing for too much, being too happy, was bad luck. The sort of bad luck no one could shake.

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Research statement

Research background

Women walking: fragments explores the way contemporary women encounter and interact with the city. Inspired by feminist writers contesting the masculine notion of the *flâneur* (Woolf 2008; Lessing 1972, 1993, 1998; Barnes 1996), this work explores ways of writing contemporary women into the city.

Research contribution

This work takes up the tradition of writing about walking/the city and explores the female *flâneur* or *flâneuse* in her relationship to an Australian city, specifically Melbourne. It aims to make women's place in and relationship to the city visible through fiction. It asks if the city is still (as it was for Benjamin and Baudelaire) a 'male' space and actively explores the gendered nature of constructions of the city.

Research significance

This work, including the associated blog (Gandolfo), aims to open up discussion about the nature of contemporary women's relationship to the city, and the relationship between walking, memory and placemaking. Its significance was recognised by the City of Melbourne through an arts grant and an invitation to read from it at a public *Poetry at Fed Square* reading.

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