

Articulating the Fact Behind the Fiction: Narrative Inquiry as a Research Methodology for Historical Novelists

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INTRODUCTION

Writers of historical fiction are not conventionally academics, yet research is an important aspect of the groundwork that they complete to build an authentic and credible portrait of an imagined past. Various described as a ‘bricoleur as bower-bird’ (Webb & Brien, 2011) or ‘magpie’ (Pullinger, 2008) approach to research, creative writers of historical fiction conduct research into a period in time drawing on a wide range of data as the needs of the story dictate. This chapter argues that such research can usefully be conceived, pursued and explained as arts-based, and arts-informed, narrative inquiry. As the narrative inquiry approach is deemed ‘best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 55) and encourages the review of diverse categories and sources of data including personal

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accounts, it is a promising framework for historical novelists. The chapter explains the relevance of this approach as a methodological manoeuvre for organizing and articulating a novelist's engagement with historical fact in order to create historical fiction.

Further to the somewhat altruistic purpose of examining and explaining the relationship between 'factual' or 'true stories' and creative writing, the question arises of why an historical fiction writer might engage with narrative inquiry, or indeed any formal research, at all? Beyond an enhanced and reflexive understanding of one's own practice, there are multiple benefits flowing from such a project, including the possibility of non-fiction publications in the form of scholarly journal articles, media publications, books, essays and lectures as well as the potential to earn higher formal education qualifications, particularly doctoral status and thereby diversify and expand a writing career. Inferential credibility (as well as publicity) for an author's works of fiction may also flow from such exposition of creative practice. Further to this, developing authors may benefit from the sharing and mapping of creative practice-led research through a narrative inquiry in developing their own skills and options as historical novelists.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH FOR WRITERS OF HISTORICAL FICTION

Historical fiction is defined by the Historical Novel Society (Lee, [n.d.](#)) as any fiction that is written about events in contexts that are 50 years or more in the past. Other efforts at defining the genre suggest a more inclusive timeframe at 25 years or more, or even two to five years in the past (Hoffman, [2002](#)). In addition to focusing on a specific period and place in history, historical fiction is differentiated from non-fictional historical accounts because historical novels

focus on human consequences of historical events. The human consequences may be embarrassing moments, or humorous happenstance or the loss of life, loved ones and personal property. It can depict humor and irony or personal choices made because of historical events. (Hoffman, [2002](#), n.p.)

Sarricks ([1999](#)) states that historical fiction requires accuracy of historical details, authentic characterization, recognizable storyline, and an 'unfolding' pace to succeed in the genre. This chapter argues that a clearly articulated research methodology, such as that provided through narrative

inquiry, can contribute powerfully to the accuracy, authenticity, and recognizability of any fictional account of the past.

Historical fiction has its roots in the conventions of ‘realism’ established in the eighteenth century with the rise of the novel made accessible to a general reading public thanks to the development of the industrial printing press (Kovarik, n.d.). John Sutherland (2013) notes that Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, marks the start of society’s love affair with realism despite the fact that Crusoe’s adventures were entirely imagined. Realism entailed an approach to novel writing that has been described as a marriage between the report writing of journalism and literature and which found expression in Defoe’s novel and many historical novels to follow. Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) depicts the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion and is considered by many to be the first fictional novel set in a period before the life of the writer. Highly successful contemporary writers, such as Ken Follett, Philippa Gregory, and Hilary Mantel, continue the long and rich tradition of historical fiction established over several centuries by such influential writers as Tolstoy, Flaubert, Dickens, Hawthorne, James, and Graves.

It should be acknowledged that while all fiction eventually becomes ‘historical’ due to the passage of time, historical fiction writers compose a story of lives that are no longer extant, that are lost to us in the everyday sense and therefore resonant with temporality and by inference, underscoring the temporality of the present. By creating for us the rich experience of immersion in a past time, they change the way we understand our present selves in a manner distinct from our responses to contemporary fiction.

Historical fiction is currently enjoying renewed interest referred to as a ‘hot genre’ (historicalfiction.info, 2014, n.p.) with the novels of many writers, including in the Australian context Colleen McCullough, Peter Carey, Kate Grenville, and most recently Hannah Kent, achieving best-seller status. Nevertheless, contemporary fiction remains the dominant genre of novel publication and readership. In an answer to the question ‘why write about the past?’, John Cleese has playfully observed ‘Well, there is more of it’, yet most authors opt to write about the present. Perhaps this is a consequence of the necessity for the extensive and sometimes-burdensome research required to write authentic and convincing accounts of the past. While writers of contemporary fiction may also conduct extensive research, as this is research of the living, they are immersed in a world of relevant data and their selection of available sources is less constrained

by the fragmented and often arbitrary preservation of extinct worlds available from surviving sources in public or private historical records.

Well-known authors of historical fiction make the requirement for research clear:

The writers of historical fictions, just like real historians, do (or ought to do) a huge amount of research before beginning on their works, and then continue doing research until the very end. (Crowley, n.d.)

I read for a year before I begin to write a thing. (Gregory in Akbar, 2013)

As I wrote the novel I took notes about what I was doing—how I was doing the research, what I was finding out, where I was coming to a dead end. I took notes about the ‘experiential’ research I did. (Grenville, 2005)

Clearly, research informs the writing process for historical novelists but most frequently this research and the manner by which it drives, limits, and shapes the creative process remain ‘hidden or unarticulated’ (Carter in Web & Brien, 2011, p. 186). It is not usually evident to readers of historical fiction, for example, which primary, secondary, and tertiary sources were consulted by novelists, how predominantly they have influenced the research process, nor which artistic texts or artifacts may have featured in the process of researching a specific topic, time, and place. Developing a better understanding of the creative process is an important objective for increasing numbers of scholars in the discipline of creative arts practice, and creative practice-led *research* provides a mechanism for this undertaking. Brien (2006) argues that ‘it is as researchers that creative writers can provide valuable insights into the creative process and how creativity can be enhanced both in other academic disciplines and the wider community’ (p. 53).

Leading researchers in the discipline, Kroll and Harper (2013) describe a range of productive methods to *draw together* critical and creative practice in writing and emphasize that it is particularly important to explain the convergence between the practice of research and the practice of creative writing. The proliferation of creative arts doctorates over the last two decades (Webb & Brien, 2011) is evidence of the growing interest in framing the creative writing process within a theoretical framework that aims to explicate creativity itself.

In order to better illustrate how narrative inquiry research can be adopted to frame and explain a creative writing project, the author incorporates quotes from the exegesis of a current PhD study in creative writing.

The thesis explores the process of researching and writing a novel set in the 1930s in Woollahroomooloo, a dockside suburb of Sydney, Australia, where the author's family by marriage has a long history. The project sources a wide variety of data including public records such as local history accounts, maps, newspaper reports, filmed footage, radio broadcasts, photographs and so on as well as creative works of the period including novels, songs, poetry, and painting. Family history data from surviving family members was also sourced in order to build a credible, authentic, and engaging narrative of what the past may have been like for this community. The story is inspired by stories themselves, and much of the 'data' is in the minutiae of the daily life of this family.

My father-in-law, who passed away before I met my husband, is and always has been for me, a narrative. A story told in the past tense. A hero swallowed in time but ever-present at the dinner tables of our family gatherings, reaching through time to straighten slumped shoulders or correct poor table manners and intrude on the lives of the living through story. 'If your father were here' is a familiar mantra uttered by my mother-in-law as we eat off the crockery he purchased in Iran, laid out on the rosewood table he had carved in China, overlooked by his paintings of the Sydney foreshore completed after his stroke and hanging on the walls of the comfortable home purchased with the salary he made as an oil explorer. In many respects he is very 'here'.

So, narrative inquiry offers a 'bower-bird' methodology that embraces manifold sources and forms of data for the purpose of developing a story that can account for the lives of a selected population in a historical era and geographical context.

Research conducted for the purpose of writing an historical novel can be usefully understood as a sub-genre of narrative inquiry that is described as arts-based, and arts-informed, narrative inquiry. Arts-based narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) involves field text gathering while arts-informed narrative inquiry refers to research text presentation which may be visual, performative, or textual in the form of prose or poetry. Research begins with an arts-based process of identifying, reviewing, and analyzing relevant resources and texts and develops into arts-informed text construction in the form of a novel, for example, and frequently, an exegesis explaining the relationship between the research and the creative writing process.

I think of this story as a swing with one support rope constructed from 'factual evidence' drawn from available primary and secondary data, and the other from creative moves drawn from the aesthetics and conventions of fiction. So, a romance may blossom where none existed and a couple of bad guys in the family may move into a later generation in order to provide necessary human interest and colour, but they will speak in historically appropriate vernacular, engage in real contemporary issues and attend historically significant events in the transportation available in the era.

Indeed, arts-informed qualitative inquiry is 'burgeoning' as part of 'the postmodern movement involving a search for methodologies offering more authentic representations' (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 2). That is, representations that offer readers direct and sustained access to recognizable and convincing voices, perceptions, and experiences of a specific community in time and space. In the context of fiction, such representations are, by definition, not *real* and not *true*, but are 'realistic' and 'truthful' offering the reader a multiplicity of meanings (Leavy, 2015) in contrast to the defined conclusions iterated for the reader in conventional or non-artistic research. It can be argued that while qualitative researchers tend to select representative quotations from interviewees and argue on the basis of these for some generalizable conclusion, fiction writers deploying narrative inquiry create believable stories within which realistic conversations take place leaving the reader free to reflect and conclude as they will. The heavily trodden pathways that writers create between sources that describe an historical event and their fictional account are shared with readers by the creative writer engaging in narrative inquiry research so that readers may ponder not only the meanings of a fiction but also the meanings and implications of the process of fictionalization. A narrative inquiry account of historical fiction writing hence allows the reader a degree of textual reflexivity that generates meanings greater than the sum of the parts. There is the fiction and there is the research and between them is the creative process laid bare.

DEFINING AND JUSTIFYING NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS A RESEARCH METHOD FOR WRITERS OF HISTORICAL FICTION

In the early twentieth century, possible frameworks and processes for research diversified from the traditional and dominant positivist approach in which scientific knowledge was 'assumed to be a direct mirror of real-

ity' (Sexton, 1997, p. 7). Such knowledge was established through processes of experimentation and manipulation in laboratory-based scientific seclusion with the influence of the researcher suppressed or obscured in order to achieve 'objectivity'. An alternative approach to developing our understanding of the world emerged in the Chicago School of Sociology in the form of narrative inquiry as a means of representing life experience (Chase, 2005 in Lal & Suto, 2012, p 4). Such an approach offered sociologists a way of understanding, organizing, and presenting human experience that was not confined to numerical or statistical measures, nor the artificial domain of the laboratory but provided insights developed through sustained engagement with real people in the ordinary contexts of their daily lives.

The narrative inquiry approach is

underpinned by the ontological assumption that humans organize their experiences, memories, life situations, and events in narrative form and as such the nature of reality is at least in part storied. This ontological stance extends the conventional understanding of narrative from being a representation of experience (or some aspect of it) to narrative being a form of experience. (Bruner, 1991 in Lai & Suto, 2012, p. 6)

Just as a novel, particularly an historical novel, is a public account of a specific community, place, and time, it is also an individual *experience* for a reader. That is, it has repercussions for the reader in how it affects their understandings, perceptions, and feelings. Reading is not a passive exercise and stories are not neutral accounts. If this were the case, novels would be dry, somnambulant matter indeed. The power of stories to both recount and change our lives is recognized in narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry is primarily employed for the purpose of understanding human experience(s) rather than solving specific social problems or informing decisions as much applied research seeks to do. In narrative inquiry, 'the stories that people tell are the vehicles through which experiences are studied' (Lal & Suto, 2012, p. 6). This form of inquiry is based largely on the assumption that stories are a form of social action and the telling of stories is one way that humans experience and make sense of their lives (Bruner, 1991; Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2006; Riessman, 2008; Caine & Steves, 2009; Lal & Suto, 2012). Storytelling is recognized in all cultures as a valuable tool for teaching and learning. Indeed, in cultures with a circular and indirect rather than linear and direct communication style (Bennet, 1993), such as indigenous Australian cultures, storytelling

is the preferred methodology for instruction, so beautifully demonstrated in the recent Australian film *Ten Canoes* which adopts traditional aboriginal storytelling to address the complication of sexual lust for the young hero.

However, the role of the storyteller is not conventionally associated with the scientist. In narrative inquiry, this association is critical. Indeed, predominant theorists and practitioners of narrative inquiry, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000), have described the traditional tendency to stress the objectivity of the researcher as ‘the silent ... perfect, idealised, inquiring, moralising self as a form of self-deception’ (p. 62). They go on to point out that narrative inquirers frequently make their relationships with the research participants and subject matter explicit and reflect on these relationships throughout the research as a means of ‘verifying’ the research through ‘transparency’, terms that may substitute for ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ as they are deployed in the positivist tradition. The following is an example of the researcher’s reflection on their relationship to subject matter:

I love fiction. I love Australian fiction. I love historical fiction. I like storytelling. I like hearing stories and have responded to hearing stories of my family by marriage about the patriarch (long dead) who I have only ever known in a ‘fictional’ sense. I have left wing tendencies and the era of his youth is highly political so the story I tell will align with the working class struggles of the period and location. I am a qualitative researcher and wish to minimise risk—to myself and participants (family)—which pushes me towards fiction. I fear that the story may not align adequately with the competing views of family members about the patriarch’s life and so I have built a world around him loosely based on the family facts and heavily augmented and sometimes challenged by historical facts and context derived from published works of fiction and non-fiction.

‘That didn’t happen to him’, or ‘You didn’t include...’ are frequent and welcome statements from my husband as I tell him some of the story. The fact is, it could have happened and the other fact is that telling ‘everything’ that happened is not necessarily a good story.

It is not only the narrative inquirer who is engaged in the telling of the story of course. Research informants or participants, where they exist, play a crucial and ongoing role in a narrative inquiry study. In a narrative inquiry, relational issues are at the heart of the research process, including the selection and initiation processes for establishing participation and consent through to representation of findings (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000). As Dewey (1934, 1938) argued over 70 years ago and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have further expounded, continuity and interaction are crucial to understanding and accounting for experience. In narrative inquiry, the relationship between researcher and researched is consistently relevant and forms an important part of the story. For such reasons perhaps, narrative inquiry research has been practiced extensively in the fields of education and health, particularly nursing, where the relationships between teacher and student or nurse and patient are as important as the professional knowledge and skills of the practitioner.

Stories can be told through varied mediums of expression including verbal accounts, but also written accounts, filmed, photographed, painted, or sculpted accounts and data that contributes to details for such stories is available in private and public artifacts, such as maps, police records, government reports, media coverage, advertisements, popular songs and, of course, other stories. Narrative inquiry tends to draw from widely diverse sources of data wherever and whenever the data contributes to the development of characters, location, era, and thematic concerns relevant to a particular study. Where relevant and possible, the personal narratives or stories of individuals who have experience of the phenomena under study, and in the case of historical fiction research, the setting of the story, are invaluable to the narrative inquirer. It is argued that in the case of narrative inquiry interviewing, the interviewer is not only actively listening to interviewees' accounts but seeks to engage the interviewees in the telling of stories (Riessman, 2008; Lal & Suto, 2012) at times deploying cues in changes of context or inclusion of texts (see Keats, 2009) to stimulate memories and the stories that flow from them. The following is an example of such engagement:

As we wondered through the library exhibits of diaries and surviving personal objects of World War One soldiers, we came across embroidered postcards from France. 'I had forgotten these', exclaimed G. 'Isn't it funny how you forget about things entirely and then when you see them, all the memories come flooding back. I remember when my mother...' It was just like the time we sat together over the old airline suitcase full of family photographs which had not been viewed for years. Many photographs triggered strong memories and elicited stories associated with the various characters and events portrayed. Some photos drew a blank and were dismissed as 'someone or other... who knows'? Part of family history that was not her part. So, central and marginal characters and events emerge from her story triggered by images and objects long forgotten.

In this manner, a historical novelist as narrative inquirer travels ‘through time in our memories shifting our imaginings backwards, expanding out our life stories, enabling multiple possible resonances that may connect our storied worlds to others’ (Hale Hankins, 1998 in Caine & Steves, 2009, p. 6).

Narrative inquirers are freed from the objective of many qualitative research studies that seek to establish cross-case theories from data in that the research is case-specific. Narrative inquiry is a contiguous practice (Butler-Kisber, 2010) seeking to establish and illustrate connections between data in a specific context rather than seeking definitions. In the case of narrative inquiry conducted as creative practice-led research, the ‘connections’ of interest are those between factual input and creative, fictional output. In these connections lie new understandings of the triggers for creativity and the rationale for manipulation of ‘the facts’ for the purposes of fiction.

THE BENEFITS OF A NARRATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH FOR HISTORICAL FICTION

Selecting a narrative inquiry approach for research conducted for the writing of historical fiction is a methodological manoeuvre that makes ontological sense and provides a methodological framework that enables the articulation of the relationship between research work and creative work.

Creswell (2007) identifies four worldviews for qualitative researchers, including post-positivist, constructivist, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism. The constructivist approach, established through the work of such theorists as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Gregory Bateson, defines reality as socially constructed/created through social practices, interaction, and experiences. Therefore, all constructed meanings represent a particular and non-definitive point of view, and researchers working within the constructivist model accept that there are ‘multiple ways of understanding/knowing the world’ (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 7). So, ‘the perspective of the observer and the object of observation are inseparable’ (Sexton in Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 7). Yet such inevitable entanglement of the observer and the observed does not discredit the value of one account of the ‘real’. Given such ontological assumptions, it is not difficult to see how a constructivist, narrative inquiry method of research is highly suitable for the historical novelist wishing to articulate the rationale for the

authenticity of a story by an examination of how and from what research experiences it was constructed.

Explaining *how* the story has been constructed from a range of sources including the personal stories of relevant informants is essential in establishing the credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness of any account proposed as a research-based, creative practice-led study conducted as a narrative inquiry.

Credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness are all criteria of quality that have been invoked by grounded theorists and narrative inquirers working from post-positivist, constructivist, and constructionist assumptions. Pundits of both methodologies have suggested that the quality of a study can be conveyed through the transparency of the research process. (Riessman, 2008 in Lal & Suto, 2012, p. 12)

Narrative inquiry can provide such transparency and is highly suitable for a creative arts-led research project because judging the quality of a narrative inquiry also includes an appraisal of its aesthetic components and capacity to evoke emotion in the reader/audience (Riessman, 2008). Creative practice-led research most frequently involves the development of a creative/artistic piece of work accompanied and explained by an exegesis. In the generation of these dual and conjoined texts, one creative and the other theorized and empirically based, creative practice-led research can satisfy aesthetic and emotional criteria for constructing the 'real' through both a fictional and a fact-based account of it.

In the last three decades, creative writing theses have proliferated, and a considerable literature has developed in relation to the creative writing thesis and the exegesis (see, for example, *Text Special Issue Illuminating the Exegesis* 2004). There is debate on the benefits and necessity for an exegesis along with significant variation in the purpose, content, format, and length. Dunlop (1999) completed a novel as a PhD researching the teaching of literature and argued for the novel or literary narrative itself 'as a viable mode of representation for research is envisioned in light of the perception that ideas can be reflectively addressed through the arts in order to enlarge human understandings' (n.p.). However, it is conventionally accepted that 'It is the exegesis that "proves" the work is not just art-as-usual, but art-as-knowledge—a part of the doctoral tradition' (Webb & Melrose, 2013).

Boyd (2010) reviews an extensive range of creative writing research in higher degrees and claims that the exegesis should be more than just an explanation or reflection and could be ‘a site of experimentation; an opportunity to theorise about creative writing as a discipline’ (p. 22). To explicate the process of the research backgrounding and informing a piece of fiction opens a new level of engagement with the creative text for the reader by addressing methodological wonderings about where and how the account is located in terms of the available sources and forms of data.

Upon receiving research findings delivered through performative texts, visual arts and written stories, one can be left ‘stranded’ with questions about research assumptions, intentions, data sources and analytical processes. (Lal & Suto, 2012, p. 13)

Narrative inquiry can satisfy the need for some readers of historical fiction to identify the threads of data drawn from research and distinguish them from the creative moves of the novelist in accounting for and responding to this data. It should be made methodologically evident in the exegesis of any creative writing study how the research data informed the creative writing and was transformed in this process from ‘data’ to ‘story’. Fictional strategies that are deployed to fill gaps, disguise and protect identities, and develop an engaging plot can be tracked and explained in order to explicate the normally ‘hidden’ or ‘unarticulated’ (Carter in Webb & Brien, 2011, p. 186) creative process. Murphy (2004 in de Mello, 2007) explains the reflexive and integrative creative process:

I became interested, as I created the fictionalised pieces, in the process of creating fiction in a research framework and what that meant in the process... it became an exploration of moving in and out of worlds, the worlds of the children in the inquiry, the fictionalised world, and the world I inhabited as narrative inquirer. (p. 21)

In this symbiotic pattern of moving between related but distinct texts as they are constructed, as well as once they are completed, a successful exegesis identifies connections and deviations which emerge between ‘data’ and ‘fiction’ and seeks to explain these moves and these relationships in terms of ‘representing’ and (re) creating history.

In the fictional work that emerges from a narrative inquiry, ‘truth’ is built up from a rich and broad iteration of the experiences, values, behav-

iors, life events, and artifacts of the target community in their socio-historical context. The inevitably subjective accounts provided by research informants may not be in agreement and may, in fact, be contradictory yet, as Sarah Pollard demonstrates in her recent film *The Stories We Tell*, ‘truth may come from editing the facts, whereby an unedited talking head may yield little’ (Lambert, 2014, p. 19). Leys argues that philosophers, scientists, writers of history, and writers of historical fiction are essentially establishing truth via ‘imaginative leaps’:

History (contrary to the common view) does not record events. It merely records echoes of events—which is a very different thing—and, in doing this, it must rely on imagination as much as on memory ... the historian and the novelist both must invent the truth. (Leys, 2007, p. 43)

It is in mapping and articulating these imaginative leaps that creative practice-led research conducted as narrative inquiry can contribute both an engaging historical novel and important new knowledge about the creative process itself.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explained the efficacy of narrative inquiry, particularly arts-informed and arts-based narrative inquiry, as a research methodology for creative practice researchers. It has been argued that narrative inquiry provides a suitable ontological, practical, and analytical framework by which writers of historical fiction can provide exegetical rationale for their fictional accounts of the past. Narrative inquiry can account for the role of the researcher in relationship to the researched as well as the relationship between research data and the creative writing process and product. These accounts contribute important new knowledge providing more comprehensive and scholarly understandings of the elusive creative process.

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