

The Fingerprint Thief:
a crime novel
and exegesis

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Abstract

This practice-led PhD consists of two elements – a crime novel titled ‘The Fingerprint Thief’ and an accompanying exegesis discussing the techniques and creative pathways utilised when creating this novel. The novel draws heavily on the genre of the police procedural but also aims to move beyond that genre by introducing a forensically-employed protagonist whose textual readings of fingerprints reveals character, lifestyle and emotion in a poetic manner. The novel is set in 1990s Melbourne during the construction of the Burnley Tunnel and follows a fingerprinter’s investigation of the murder of a young anthropology student. The exegesis explores key writerly choices such as why the novel is a crime fiction, what crimes drive the narrative, whether to privilege plot or character during the initial writing of the text, and how to represent groups society has ‘othered’. The methodology of the exegesis is threefold. Firstly, it aims to present a reflective examination of existing works in the genre of crime fiction and calls on the practices of comparable practitioners such as Patricia Cornwell, Raymond Chandler, Kathryn Fox and Marele Day. Secondly, it offers an evaluation of the relationship between my work and a range of critical theories as disparate as Georg Simmel’s concept of the ‘stranger’, Kate Millett’s arguments about patriarchy, and Gayatri Spivak’s writings on the subaltern. Finally, it interrogates my own processes as a writer and the specific creative techniques that lay open to me as I wrote the novel.

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Declaration by Candidate

I certify that the thesis entitled '*The Fingerprint Thief* a crime novel and exegesis' submitted for the degree of PhD contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma; to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and is not based on joint research or publications.

Full name:.....

Signed:.....

Date:.....

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Preface

Creating a crime novel could be seen as a mystery in itself. How does one construct and solve a fictional crime within 80,000 words? What is the best technique for growing character in a convincing and consistent manner throughout the length of the story? At which point in the plot can I entwine an unobtrusive yet effective thematic message? Resolving questions such as these proved to be a long process of detection that involved reflective examination of existing works in the genre and the practice of comparable practitioners; an evaluation of the ideas of critical theorists; and an interrogation of my own methodology as a writer. The two components of my PhD unify as an outcome of this detection, and can be regarded as an attempt to solve this mystery of how to write a crime novel. Together, they combine to represent my writing journey in that they chart both the process and result of my turning theory into practice.

The interaction of the exegesis and artefact

While these components grew as separate entities, it's important to note that, as they developed, they engaged in a process of cross-fertilisation. Whenever I encountered difficulties during the writing of the novel, reflecting on critical theory and texts outlining the techniques of writing fiction became useful. I would wrestle with these ideas in my journal and in drafts of the exegesis until I reached a resolution I could apply to my fiction. I would then return to the novel and rewrite with my new found insight or technique. In this way, the knowledge gained was integrated back into the novel. Later, these journeys from problem to resolution became sites of discussions in the exegesis.

Ordering the exegesis in relation to the novel

A challenge that arose from working in this organic manner was how to order these many sites of interrogation into a reasonably linear narrative for the purpose of the exegesis. Each creative

dilemma faced did not exist in isolation, but rather all dilemmas lived at once in my writer's mind. Imposing a sequence and separation of topics of enquiry was to suggest an ordered process of creativity and a logical pattern of cause and effect that seemed an artificial representation of the generally rhizomatic creative process. For example, in an early section of the exegesis on the positioning of the corpse, I am confident my character's profession will be fingerprinting. Yet it is not until a few sections later that I explain why. The question of how my female protagonist will cope with the problem of working within a field that is seen as oppressing women hangs over many sections, yet I must contain it solely to one for the sake of avoiding repetitious argument. I open the exegesis with the indication that I have always had a vague sense of what the crime that powers the novel will be, yet in the late section on Theme and Setting I am still testing the idea of this crime to see how it interacts with location and mood. My resolution was to present eight sites of discussion that had both an internal logic and an overlapping reach. These, I believe, are representative of the dynamic, non-sequential and cyclical nature of practice-led research.

The effect of the PhD on my writing

The movement from artefact to exegesis and back again is an important technique that has extended beyond the boundary of this PhD. The relationship between journal, novel and exegesis has paved my journey towards creating other novels. It has forced me to address one of my greatest fears about writing: the anxiety that once I have created, I will not be able to create again. This examination of what critics call 'studio practice' (Barrett 2004) has helped alleviate this anxiety as it has made more clear to me the methodology that pushes my creative process from initiation to completion. Recognising that I do indeed have a methodology reassured me that my creative process is not accidental and can be replicated.

My relationship to Critical Theory

A surprising aspect of my engagement with practice-led research was the realisation that my creative practices could intersect with the broader theoretical approaches offered by various critical, cultural and literary theories. In my exegesis, I attempt to expose how these interact with the more technical elements of writing utilised in my novel, including the creation of character, theme, setting and plot.

My relationship with theory has been a lengthy and difficult process. When I first embarked on my adventure of creation, I had little faith in the ability of critical and cultural theories to add value to my novel or to impact upon my creative process. As a writer, I lived and breathed the mechanics of story and story alone. I believed creativity and theory lived in opposition and that theory would suppress my ability to create. However, after deeper reading into the critical positioning open to writers and the manner in which they integrate these positions into their stories and characters, I realised that harnessing some aspects of critical theory can bring greater relevance and socio-political comment to my crime fiction. These include the long debated feminist predicaments of how a woman can within the patriarchy of law enforcement and the postcolonial debate over how we ‘other’ marginalised groups such as the Indigenous and women criminals. These issues proved to be a direct influence on the creation of character and narrative. The experiences common to those affected by these theories could be integrated into my characters’ background or experiences in order to contextualise the conflicts they face in the story. These predicaments can become plot aspects or character turning points.

The role of the reflective journal

The key to revealing and developing my methodology was the keeping of what I titled my ‘book of ideas and inspirations’. As I created the novel, I recorded plot ideas, lines of prose, and dialogue into this journal. As the novel and creative process gained momentum, I recorded less about the process of creation. With the rise in my creative confidence, the journal developed into a repository of academic ideas for my exegesis rather than a site of debate, discussion and discovery. I began to negotiate ideas and debates directly in the pages of my exegesis rather than in the pages of my journal. For example, my exploration of how my sleuth can work within the patriarchal system of law enforcement began as readings of radical feminist theorists such as Kate Millett. I used the journal to record any of her key arguments that I felt could be relevant to my character. My debate over how my character would interrogate and negotiate these problems became a direct passage in my exegesis. From there, I built the resolution to that debate into my novel. I would then return to the exegesis to add in a section on how that resolution worked within the novel.

The entry point for the examiner

I feel the reader would benefit from reading the novel first. This allows the shiny surface of the project to be seen before the girders and beams that support it are exposed. Experiencing the novel first allows the mystery of creativity to be lived rather than analysed. Turning to the exegesis after the novel ensures the reader has a reference against which to chart the predicaments and resolutions of this document of detection.