

Language as/of Power: Fate and free will in speculative fiction

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Abstract

The creative component of my doctoral thesis, *The Ghost Waves*, is a story that centres on the power of words. Set in alternate version of contemporary Australia, a worldwide organisation, SACER, seeks to control language and, by extension, the actions and beliefs of the wider world. Over recent years, the headquarters of SACER in regions around the world have been falling one by one, until the small Australian branch is the last one remaining.

Within the wider organisation, two departments fight over the consequences of the power of words, one blaming the other for failed death prophecies that trap people in a limbo between life and death. *The Ghost Waves* explores these boundaries of life/death, and real/unreal, through the presence of the resultant zombies, people who exist in two alternate realities at the same time.

Questions of fate and free-will are central to the story, as within this world words can be used to write destinies and even end lives.

Two of the main characters, Idris and Orlagh, are counterparts from the opposing SACER departments, both struggling to prepare for their futures as heads of their respective departments. Circumstances throw them together and, with each other's help, they set about unravelling the mysterious disappearance of Áine, Orlagh's sister and Idris's friend.

Two overlapping mysteries thread through the novel: Áine's disappearance, and the murder of a SACER agent. This death is notable because of the method - one that suggests someone has discovered the power over life and is able to literally inscribe a person's death.

The race to discover who has this power is carried out under the looming threats of fear and retaliation that begin to tear apart SACER, while Idris and Orlagh's investigation brings them closer to discovering the truth.

The accompanying exegesis, *Language as/of Power: Fate and free will in speculative fiction*, examines the themes of the novel. It explores how words can affect free will and fate, blur and transgress of boundaries and hold power through

names. These ideas are located within the wider sphere of speculative fiction, a generic designation which is also examined.

There is an online element to the story, where two characters communicate through internet chat rooms. The inclusion of new media within the story offers a chance to explore constructions of identity within cyberspace, as well as the new language that is evolving alongside technology.

Declaration by candidate

I, Joanne Allan, declare that this thesis: contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome; to the best of the my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome; and where the work is based on joint research or publications, discloses the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.

The creative element of the thesis was proof-read by Anthony Berry (Accredited Editor (IPEd)). The work undertaken was in accordance with current Australian Standards for Editing Practice and was restricted to Standard D (Language and Illustrations) and Standard E (Completeness and Consistency). No advice was given on Standard C (Substance and Structure).

Signed: _____

Date: _____

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Preface

This project was undertaken to explore themes of language and power through the creation of a story employing and examining these issues, and an accompanying exegesis which situates the creative piece alongside academic work and other novels.

My research methodology was informed by the idea of Umberto Eco's narrated research (Eco, 2006), which seeks to record the entirety of the research journey, treating this process as the site of knowledge, rather than just the research questions that led directly to the conclusions. This approach allows for the inclusion of areas that may have been abandoned, illuminating the problem areas that may still have had an impact on the final product. After investigating the use of autoethnography and ultimately deciding against this approach, my model of enquiry was practice-led research that incorporated ideas from the "mystory" approach of Gregory Ulmer (1989), situating this primary data alongside academic writing and the experience of other authors in the area.

This exegesis examines the reasons for and consequences of labelling works by genre, reconsidering the concept through the light of my own difficulties with classification. The academic work within the area of speculative fiction, and the broader considerations of genre, as well as the thoughts of other authors regarding both, will be examined in order to situate my own experience.

One of the main elements of the story is the presence of so-called 'zombies'. Writing the exegesis prompted further research into this area in order to position my representation of the living dead against more classical depictions and meanings. The result of this exploration into the social, psychological and cultural connotations of zombies in turn shaped how these creatures were represented within the novel, with historical usage and symbolism entering the novel after these were discovered during the research.

Another aspect of language that is investigated is the notion of names and naming, and the transparency of the intentions of authors in this choice. There is also consideration of the potentially prophetic nature of these, further exploring issues of

free will and destiny. My choices are examined through the twin prisms of popular usage and expert commentary, with the research both led by and feeding back into these choices.

Within the genre, the power of words was especially relevant, with speculative fiction a site for fantasy worlds that contain powerful words in spells and prophecies. When my inclusion of these topics led to the exploration of academic and popular work in this area, the results of this enquiry then informed my own practice, with my understanding enriched by the consideration of the research.

The novel's length is over 100,000 words – a reflection of the length of other works in the genre.¹ This length is typical, presumably to cover the necessary world-building involved in speculative fiction.

The novel sits alongside other works in the area such as *Good Omens* by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, which centres around prophecies in a fantasy setting, and Terry Pratchett's Discworld series. My work is also influenced by Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, a recent novel that shares elements of alternate universes and the supernatural within an otherwise recognisable world, as well as elements of power and control from George Orwell's *1984*.

It is envisioned that the creative component of this submission will be read first, with knowledge of some aspects of the story presumed in the discussion within the exegesis.

¹ After the initial submission called for amendments, the subsequent novel manuscript is no longer over 100,000 words.