Eugen Bacon

"Writerly passage: Crafting stories within a story"

> *The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarise the strange and*
> *mystify the familiar, is the test of their power. (Toni Morrison)*

I often struggle with a structured approach to writing, better liking creative impetus that roams free. My natural instinct turns away from graphing, orderliness: drawing board, mind-mapping, butcher paper, storyboarding, cue cards, the works...and opts for fleshing things out blind. Uncertain where I am going, I polish as I go.

Carving this artefact, a fantasy novel that comprises stories-within-a-story, I find myself thinking excessively, forcing myself into action, charting down orderliness.

The *artefact* is a personal experiment evolving through reflection, knowledge, experimentation. In *Outbreeds*, this 70,000-word literary fantasy novel about a new strain of females in the town of East Point, I find myself at home with made-up characters, places, even language:

> *MYRA LISTENS to the fading notes of Amber's song along the boulevard, not*
> *understanding a word of it: 'Mah ran en at qu flate vene mondu…'*

> (Bacon 2013)

Before my personal experiment goes public, I begin to invent myself, approaching exegesis. This appraisal of methodology, challenges, assumptions and critical reflection brings trepidation and a yen to be free. I harbour a deep-seated longing that my process, the coming to know, will remain raw and unjudged.

Interlacing the artefact with exegesis

With an experiential, contextualised approach, I mean to uncover three research questions:

i   *Can a writer of short fiction productively apply a model of stories-within-a-story to build a novel?*

> I am a lover not a fighter – clichéd, I know. Being a short story writer does not create a novelist. Making love with short stories is easy. There is atmosphere, seduction, location, reward. A story skeleton gives you atmosphere: beginning, middle, end. Seduction – you tease out the idea. Location – you find people and place to live the idea. Reward – soft music, lights... take your time, slowly remove the narrative's clothes. Pay close attention to her responses. When she is ready there is no holding back.

> With a novel, it's war. Yes, there is atmosphere, location; but the size of the thing means you are fighting with it non-stop. Beginning, middle to end – it's a struggle not to go to the ground. You are finding structure, energy, creativity... go, go, go. It is endless: you spar with it, a quest for plot complexity. Lower your guard and plot runs away. If you're not judging your distance so it all comes together, now you are dodging the unfinished novel. And have you passed the screen test? Publishers want to know how they can transform your novel into the next Harry Potter. Writing a novel is bloody war.

> The artefact is a speculative fiction novel birthed from distinct but interconnected fantasy shorts:

- *A Puzzle Piece* (introducing Salem Drew)
- *The Hybrid (*introducing Myra Lexus, Salem's daughter*)*

The characters, their stories, work perfectly to convince me there is a literary fantasy novel there, one to build story by story.

The novel employs the autonomous story *The Hybrid* to investigate Myra's tale. Daughter to a human (Salem) and an otherworldly male (T-Mo) from the land of *Grovea*, Myra is a hybrid of aberrant ability. She battles to find identity in a conformist world. The start of her story unveils from the eyes of a smitten boy (Vida):

> IT STARTED WITH A NAME. And ended in a swim.
>
> Russet tresses enveloped Dale Hocking's pert face. Smile lines formed a faultless triangle from her nose to the corners of lips half curled in a pout. So young, bewitching: she was divine, no doubt, Vida Stuart knew. But Myra Lexus was exquisite, her kind of beauty more rare than a comet. She electrified him, stirred things in him that bewildered. And it was not just the sapphire hair splashed with light, or skin ever so fluorescent to behold; it was her secret.
>
> That spring morning when Vida saw Myra naked as dew in the river, hair roped with seaweed and dripping wet, he knew she was a river child. He watched from the crag as she glided back and forth, hundreds of miles just about. Each blade of her hand cut smooth and powerful against the white tide, her swim far different from his splash and furious paddle. He watched, even as it began to rain, a slow clap. It swelled into a pounding storm, mightier and mightier swirls that loosened pebbles. Myra swam deeper, further out. Water closed over her head and he panicked.
>
> (Bacon 2013)

From *A Puzzle Piece* the novel draws out an origin, the story of Salem (Myra's mother):

> T-MO HAPPENED exactly one week after the puzzle piece woman with 50-cent eyes.
>
> One night, black as misery, Salem Drew stood, arms wrapped about herself, at the bus depot three streets from the IGA where she worked late shifts. A bunch of commuters had just clambered onto a no. 146 for Carnegie and Salem found herself alone at the depot.
>
> She waited for a night express bus to take her back to a cheerless home that housed equally cheerless parents. A clipping wind around her was just as dreary, foggy as lunacy. There, just then, the facet of a woman's face jumped into her vision.
>
> Salem blinked. Was the woman real or a figment of thought? Singular parts of her were easy to file as possibly real: maroon hair, lemon rind skin as rugged as it was pale. And the scar… But all put together, the cohesion was lost.

The puzzle piece woman stood head lowered, quiet in the mist. When she raised her head, silver shimmered from one good eye, petite and round as a 50-cent coin. The other eye was broken. Even though it was as smooth and flawlessly round as the right eye, it held no sight. The coin perfection of its shape was embedded in scar tissue, a disfigurement that needed nothing but a single glance to seal the hideousness of it.

If Salem thought to speak, to ask, "Who are you? How long have you been standing there, watching me, and why?" the mighty keenness of the woman's good telescopic eye, the one that filtered, turned inward and then came back at her without translation, threw it right out of Salem's mind.

Thunder like hammering of a thousand hooves did it. Salem ran without a scream, all the way through all that night, never minding the night bus when it whooshed past her. All she minded was the gobbling eye, and the unwarned sound of deep belly laughter that chased behind her.

(Bacon 2013)

Story by story, layer by layer, the novel matures.

ii   *Does literary writing contribute to the quality of works in science fiction, fantasy or speculative fiction?*

What this asks is whether cross-genre works.

The website on [literary elements of fiction](#) identifies the following features:

- imagery – words or phrases that create a picture in a reader's mind
- figurative language – use of words that go beyond their ordinary meaning; includes similes and metaphors
- simile – comparison between two unrelated things to suggest they are similar, using 'like' or 'as'
- metaphor – comparison between two unrelated things to suggest they are similar without use of 'like' or 'as'
- personification – giving human-like characteristics to non-human objects
- symbol – words or images suggesting something other than what they denote: e.g. diverging roads symbolising decision-making.

Outbreeds aims to embody these characteristics plus my own literary style. This chimes with the 'writerly' style Curteman describes when he says that

Every author has a basic writing style. Style is not what an author writes, but the manner in which she writes it. It is an author's unique way of communicating ideas. One might say that style is the verbal identity of a writer...Use or nonuse of figurative language, metaphors and similes speaks to style. Some authors focus on sound devices such as alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhythm...While every author has a personal style of writing, that style is not static. The author refines it through reading a variety of writers and through his own writing experiences. (2010)

On elements of literary style, Christensen spots some inherent characteristics:

- sentence structure – unconventionally crafted, digressive, fragmented syntax
- pace – heavier descriptive
- diction – expansive, elaborate
- vocabulary – fancy, flowery, punning, obscure
- dialogue – fragmented, sense of the unsaid
- point of view – omniscient, multiple
- word colour/ word sound – alliteration, assonance, consonance, dissonance, rhythm, unusual word choice
- time sequencing, allusions, language experimentation, metafictional techniques. (2013)

Calling to mind some of my favourite literary novels, let me evoke what I love about them:

Lolita (Nabokov 1955) appeals for being as controversial and infamous today as it was in 1955. Middle-aged Humbert Humbert tells (through half-mad ramblings) of his obsession and amorous activity with sexually precocious Dolores Haze, only 12 years old. The novel is ahead of its time, breaking ground in unsettling ways to challenge innocence and naturalness.

Song of Solomon (Morrison 1978) canvases Morrison's earthy, poetic voice in a rich novel that embodies fantastical and mythical elements. Here, fathers fly in ornate clouds and women radiate spells. Protagonist Milkman, nicknamed for his stretched-out nursing as a child and delayed coming of age, is fundamental to social and racial issues that Morrison unwraps.

Truth (Temple 2009): This novel's reviews tell you the kind of magic I am looking to write:

> *Tautly constructed and compulsively paced. Consistently arresting... His dialogue is entirely distinctive, full of mangled poetry and beautiful solecisms of ordinary speech. His images can catch in the mind like things glimpsed under lightning.(Observer)*
>
> *Temple leaves the reader ravaged, furious and marvelling at his technique... (Guardian)*

Temple's writing is sharp. Dialogue propels it, and, despite much bloodshed, this crime novel is decidedly literary. It reminds me of Morrison, whose dialogue – as in this excerpt from *Jazz* (1993) – carries the story to another heartbeat:

> *"Philly! Philly's gone! She took Philly!"*
>
> *"She who?" somebody asked. "Who took him?"*
>
> *"A woman! I was gone one minute. Not even one! I asked her… I said… and she said…!"*
>
> *"You left a whole live baby with a stranger to go get a record?" The disgust in the man's voice brought tears to the girl's eyes. "I hope your mama tears you up and down."*
>
> *Opinions, decisions popped through the crowd like struck matches.*
>
> *"Ain't got the sense of a gnat."*

"Who misraised you?"

"Call the cops."

"What for?"

"They can at least look."

"Will you just look at what she left that baby for?"

"What is it?"

"'The Trombone Blues'."

"Have mercy."

"She'll know more about blues than any trombone when her mama gets home."

(p.20-21)

It is useful to cast a glance at authors who have written fantasy before me. Evident in film adaptations of the novels *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1995), the *Song of Ice and Fire* series that is *A Game of Thrones* (Martin 1996), *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008) and *Twilight* (Meyer 2005), these fantasy authors all passed the screen test. As for Rowling, my lips are zip-locked lest someone misconstrues my aversion to the screen-play-ability of her work as envy.

While Tolkien might be a little distinct, none of these authors could ideally be exemplified as a writer of literary fiction. But each boasts a hefty fan-base. Collins creates such suspense in the surreal that Stephen King was quoted in Entertainment weekly as saying he 'couldn't stop reading'; the [online reviews](#) for Meyer's (2013) young-adult vampire romance speak of *'a perfect metaphor for the sexual tension that accompanies adolescence*' (*Publishers Weekly*).

I am optimistic that, by integrating literary writing with fantasy and the speculative, I may charm a broad audience. A critic articulated his thoughts on my approach:

> *Your world invites immersion. You have taken time to create something that will fully involve a reader and I expect that the reader will become quite drawn into this world. I can only think of some of the great fantasy cycles like 'Dune' when it comes to presenting a world that is deeply detailed and creates a whole new lexicon and set of reference points.*
>
> *Unlike some of these books I have never felt with your work that all the terminology becomes hard to follow...you reference different things without me having to remind myself what they are as I read. So there is a good balance there. Some fantasy novels are hard going...'Gravitor took the sword of Kalladach which had belonged to Harragan near the city of N'reath-dath etc etc.' You deftly avoid this pitfall.*

(Barry Bardoe 2013)

It is my intention that the writing showcases titillating dialogue, literary style and a clear steer from *N'reath-datisation*:

Now, at six years and a half, Tempest was lofty and shapely enough to pass for twice that age. That day from Nana Salem's, she was inside a yawning field courted on either side by a shadow of trees, halfway towards the community school, when she saw a knot of boys. At first they seemed to be standing, perhaps talking. Then with a shift of moonlight, she realised they were dancing...

She was still several metres away from the crowd when one dancer, the one with shoulders that carried the biggest sway, the one with the richest mongoloid face, disengaged from the gang. He was top dog Rock. He took a single step towards her and, in a quiet stagger of motion, the rest of them stopped dancing, one by one, and they milled beside him.

Tempest stood, a lone girl on a woodlands jaunt facing hard core hooligans a dozen strong. Rock parked himself in front of her, and whistled.

"Look what we got."

A responding whistle came from the back.

"Oh, my, yes."

"Bit brave, ain't she."

"Bit pretty too."

"Ain't she a scone?"

She picked her way, moving to skirt around them but Rock and the crowd shifted to stand in her path. Her hands balled to fists by her side.

"Feisty!" said Rock. The gang roared merrily.

"She the little freak whose mama's a hybrid," a voice in the back said.

A fresh ripple of laughter.

"That true?" Rock regarded her. "You a hybrid?"

"She no hybrid," someone quipped. "She a quarter-brid!"

They roared.

"I never seen a quarter-brid before. Feel like Columbus!"

They squealed, half-baked sounds like puppy yelps.

"Nursing your tongue little girlie?" Rock again.

"Maybe she nursing a spell."

"And she not so little."

Rock licked his lips. "Oh, my. Yes," he said slowly.

(Bacon 2013)

iii   In what ways can adult themes be adapted to be productive elements of young adult fiction?

Young adult (YA) literature tackles ideas and transitions that young adults might experience. Young adults experience a gazillion things. This means that one can write in any genre and target them.

And *any genre* goes a long way: Nichol (2012) lists 35 genres and other varieties of fiction, including detective, epic, fantasy, fictional autobiography, fictional biography, fiction, gothic, horror, melodrama, mystery, parody, romp, satire, science fiction, screwball comedy, thriller, tragedy, travelogue...

If YA literature transverses genres, are there YA taboo topics? Marquez (2012) identifies three main ones: Explicit sex. Drug use. Severe violence.

It throws wide open how far an author can travel on themes for young adults, especially if this grouping widens to include 'adultescents', sociological jargon for the new youth (SMH magazine 2004).

Adultescents loosely defines people aged 18–30 who are 'uncommitted'. They have no mortgage, no children, no long-term partnership. Their lack of commitment might make them act and think like adolescents. What bugs them? What fascinates them? What do they want to read about?

Adult themes in *Outbreeds* include rape, massacre. We look into Myra the adolescent committing her first brutality against a child nemesis:

> *Next Vida saw Myra, she stood silent on a northbound shore, naked. Skin aglow, half-formed breasts alert. His breath caught. Dale was still swimming, free, shameless, playful even – utterly oblivious of added presence.*
>
> *Not a single ripple broke the water's surface with Myra's dive. She slithered, gliding slowly like a water snake towards her unsuspecting prey. When water closed above Myra's head, chill touched Vida's flesh. Suddenly, Dale was gasping and choking, soundlessly flapping and splashing. Then water covered her head too, and there was effervescence. Endless bubbles that broke the calm surface one after another. Then the bubbles stopped.*
>
> *Even then, Vida wasn't convinced.*

He sat down and hugged his legs, waiting. Evening sun darkened and dipped into the horizon. Night fell whole and silent. Shadows awakened and crept. Darkness jumped and danced. Everything seemed perilous and weird. Wind pulled water from his eyes. A yellow moon, hostile, sinister, stalked across on the river's face and brought with it whispering that amplified to a primal scream. A bold wave slapped at the raised crag, and ice-cold spits struck Vida's skin. He caught movement behind him and there she was – Myra. She slipped, fully clothed, beside him. She smelt of seaweed.

(Bacon 2013)

But Myra's personality throughout the novel does not goad the reader to dislike her. She is as likeable as she is mysterious.

Publishers might wrestle with these concepts of children or young adults committing bloodshed and not being evil. Themes addressed in this YA novel breed controversy. But they are workable.

Insight

My passage to the finished artefact unfolds through exegesis. Andrew (2012) in 'Assessment and research' understands exegesis as a map and a plan, an articulation of methodologies. Hecq sees it as

a means of applying research methods and gaining insight into the processes of knowledge production and exchange.(2009)

While I understand the questions, I also know that the journey to finding answers to them is a dangerous one.

During re-invention as I discern the research questions – how I came about those questions and the research I need to realise in order to find some answers – as I calmly, then frantically, jot down the research process and scrutinise how my idea is different from other fantasy works, I examine my publication folio and observe my key challenges.

I reflect upon and scrutinise my practice-led research, applying intuition, attention, experimentation and new techniques to find new learnings. And what do you know? –I just might discover with animation or panic that the very research questions themselves have become stronger, diluted or transformed.

Hecq states that

Practice-led research is a notoriously difficult concept to define. This difficulty is compounded by the tendency of arts practitioners to celebrate the new, the unusual and to subvert the unexpected. (2009)

Through charted reflection I become clear on the approaches, intuitions and methods that reflect me:

my idiosyncrasies, my feelings, my subjectivities, my incompleteness, my memories, my adventures, my insights, my energy, and my growth.(Miller 2009, p.94)

Now nodding, I know there will be several false starts. I listen to Avieson (2008) urgently whispering into my ear, hinting at combining the theoretical and the creative, at creating a 'symbiotic structure

of analysis and exposition that is greater than the sum of its two parts'. I start editing, re-working, testing, reflecting...

Like Colyar (2009), I want to become writing, to become writer. Anticipating questions, clarifying complexity – real and potential – polishing context... as I communicate with an absent reader (Colyar 2009, p.428) and emerge into the present reader.

My reflection is the bridge, the element that invites crossing between artefact and exegesis.

Tactical approach

Contextualising as a creative writer affords me flexibility. It allows me to scrutinise my challenges so I can apply new learnings. Already I see the emergence of my sense of practice. This builds confidence that, through ongoing interrogation of myself and the artefact, I will reach a place of satisfaction.

Model: The novel is built on a model of stories-within-a-story. Perfectly, a novel would have a core quest or journey its single hero/ine must complete. Wright (2007) speaks of how storytellers use character archetypes in terms of story function. In this artefact, the distinction is bridged in that stories flow smoothly from one point to another. But each autonomous story bears its own quest, its archetype. There is the heroine archetype (Myra), the mentor archetype (Vida), the shapeshifter archetype (T-Mo)... In order for the novel to thrive, I suspect I must find for it a transformation arc within which to enfold the stories.

Literature review: This explores cross-genre writing, with focus on application or non-application of literary elements in science fiction, fantasy or speculative fiction.

In *Outbreeds* I seek to embody my own literary style, chiming with the 'writerly' style Curteman describes when he says that

> *Every author has a basic writing style. Style is not what an author writes, but the manner in which she writes it.* (2010)

My study also covers young adult (YA) literature and the ideas and transitions within, including 'safe' and 'taboo' themes.

Research journey: Some writers keep journals; I keep scraps. These require more structure (my nemesis) to generate into a workable journal of reflexive activities that shape and drive the artefact; that is a practical approach for a writer like me with a fluid writing practice, an adventurous one that sustains expeditions and explorations as a writer.

Far from untreated adolescent musings on abandoned love, those rambling monologues and angst-filled thought bubbles scrawled in lipstick, tears and ink in that long-ago diary of mine, the academic journal steers my already existent scrapping. Hand-scribbles of sometimes illegible writing speckled with ideas, dialogue and fragments of characterisation. These scraps grow into dog-eared piles in my handbag, by my bedside, beneath my workstation... before I transcribe them into a computer database.

Browsing the other day through my computer, I discovered electronic 'scraps' of *Outbreeds*:

There are eight planets and a large number of smaller objects orbiting the Sun. (Exactly which bodies should be classified as planets and which as "smaller objects" has been the source of some controversy, but in the end it is really only a matter of definition. Pluto is no longer officially a planet but we'll keep it here for history's sake.)				
Distance Radius Mass *Planet (000 km) (km) (kg) Discoverer Date* *--------- --------- ------ ------- ---------- -----* *Mercury 57,910 2439 3.30e23* *Venus 108,200 6052 4.87e24* *Earth 149,600 6378 5.98e24* *Mars 227,940 3397 6.42e23* *Jupiter 778,330 71492 1.90e27* *Saturn 1,426,940 60268 5.69e26* *Uranus 2,870,990 25559 8.69e25 Herschel 1781* *Neptune 4,497,070 24764 1.02e26 Galle 1846* *Pluto 5,913,520 1160 1.31e22 Tombaugh 1930* *===*				
Mercury is the closest planet to the Sun and the eighth largest. Mercury is slightly smaller in diameter than the moons Ganymede and Titan but more than twice as massive.				
orbit:	*57,910,000 km (0.38 AU) from Sun*			
diameter:	*4,880 km*			
mass:	*3.30e23 kg*			
Web	www.nineplanets.org			

I found early snippets of characterisation:

Tempest: *Titian red locks. Tiger eyes as fiery as the flaming ruby in her hair*

The child's beautiful, loud eyes switched from one face to the other, big yellow eyes that held more curiosity than baby softness, their expression more questioning than accepting, as Myra spoke fondly and delicately brushed back with a finger unruly hair the colour of ruby.

Salem*: Childlike simplicity*

Daughter of Pastor Ike and Pageant

To make my writing a state of being, as I strive to anticipate my reader's questions, clarify complexity, make sure the context is clear (Colyar 2009, p.428), I must be able look back and recognise reflective activity.

Ethnographic research: An earlier excerpt of *Outbreeds* in this article visits Vida's infatuation, his observation of Myra's skinny-dipping in the river. It sustains Miller's exploration of the author in and

out of the text. It arrives at his conclusion: no text is author-free (Miller 2008, p.93). An avid swimmer myself, completely a water person, it is abundantly clear why it came natural that I would choose a river for my story, Myra swimming in it.

On rethinking ethnography, Conquergood says:

> *Ethnography's distinctive research method, participant-observation field-work, privileges the body as a site of knowing*. (1991)

My writing process as an author of short fiction makes me a right target for ethnographic research. How I begot the novel idea, the stories-within-a-story, lets slip that I am immersed in the field of my study, acting out roles as a performer and researcher, a personal and impersonal embodiment.

Embracing my subjectivity I can objectively embody Banville's notion of 'artistic concentration' (cited in Colbert 2009), the things I employ to mentally or literally experience my characters and manage their transitions.

Practice-led research (PLR) and me: Andrew states that

> *The issue for practice-led research comes down to one element: the idea that the practitioner conducts research even as he or she creates.* (2009)

As a researcher in PLR I am both performing my art and creating. The research is the heart of my creation. Mafe and Brown (cited in Andrew 2009) suggest PLR needs

- to be unique; virgin ground whose elements or products are identifiable
- clear output open to peer scrutiny
- transparent structure, process and outcomes
- transferable knowledge.

Hecq points out that PLR is

- *Experiential and qualitative*
- *Non-quantifiable*
- *Subject to its own standards of rigour and validity*
- *The only methodology (sometimes a combination of various methodologies) suitable for answering particular research questions.*(2009)

I bring lived-in experience to a work of fantasy, even to generate primary characters. I observe the real world: how people speak, react, emote...

Assessing the unconventionality of interspecies relationship, I contemplate how it might work. Climbing into Myra's shoes, I realise that it is clear that she must be the dominant character in the relationship with (now) husband Vida. This grows into equability; the harmony of their relationship despite Vida's humanness is admirable. There is a balancing accord between Myra's superhuman capability and Vida's humanity. Myra is feisty but dependent. She needs Vida. Is this a cultural thing I am bringing in, where the man in my ethnical background holds influence over the woman?

In being creative I explore an unconventional idea through a child. Little Tempest confesses to her parents that she has murdered. She clutches Vida's waist,

her face pressed against his chest, as she trembled and trembled, a six-and-a-half year
old once more in her daddy's arms... So they told her stories. Of T-Mo, her grandfather
whose night grew silent. Of a girl named Dale Hocking whose pert face and russet curls
wound up in the river bed. Of a man-boy named Al whose body melted to porridge in the
water's wash.

Hearing the telling, Myra's voice inside a voice, and seeing Vida's inward drawn eyes,
Tempest understood. These were not stories told to reconcile her with what she had
done. These were not right or wrong stories. These stories just were. (Bacon 2013)

I perceive Tempest for the child she is and allow that as a parent I am in no position to condemn.

Colbert (2009) affirms this close relationship between researcher and research by seeing its evolving, experiential and iterative nature, which may affect the 'research process and the structure, form and style of the research paper' (p.1.). The process involves the researcher's validation of the research process and form, its scoping and continual theorising of knowledge gained through 'critical, reflective thinking and the experiential within one's practice in the academic paper' (p.1).

Complexity and depth

I stride to the nucleus of this writing project without blinkered eyes. I appreciate the personal and intellectual challenges it promises and continues to impose. Clasping an armful of assumptions, I peer through this doorway, mindful that this articulation is a snapshot at a point in time. By taking the indispensable steps across the threshold, by embarking on this writing project, only then do I abundantly experience the brunt of the project's onslaught.

Novelty: Original writing comes at a price. Very early in the novel's draft, it became apparent that things coherent in my head are not perceptible to the reader. Clasping this knowledge encourages a shifting in the novel's landscape, my quest to better understand its characters so I can portray them to the reader.

Structure: The novel's biggest dare lies in its model: stories-within-a-story. Each part tells a relatively autonomous but interrelated tale. There is no superior scheme, no layering of plot. I am frightened of realising my own fear that writing a novel is bloody war, that I might falter in exegesis.

Technique: My writing style is visual, descriptive, observational and supple. Over the years, a number of influencing authors – like Toni Morrison and Andrew McGahan – have shaped my voice, my literary style. The model of stories-within-a-story demonstrates my unstructured approach toward writing. A seed grows into characters, into narrative, into a novel. The danger of this approach, of finding surprises in my own writing, is that I might lose sight of a superior scheme, no layers of plot, that I might write short things to catch in the mind and stay, but struggle to wrap them into a novel.

What excites me above all this complexity and depth is the place where PLR might take me. At this point in time, says Hecq,

the story of practice-led research is unfolding in new and exciting directions as the
qualitative paradigm shifts and the formerly segregated roles of self, artist and
researcher are allowed to fuse. (2009)

Digesting this madness

Different books arrive in different ways and require different strategies. Most of the
books that I have written have been questions that I can't answer. In order to actually

put down the first word – I don't really have a plan – I sometimes have a character, but I can't do anything with it until the language arrives. (Morrison 2008)

In this writerly voyage I bring along Morrison's fluidity, this adventurous style of writing, this making expeditions and explorations as a writer.

As I push boundaries with literary qualities, I continue with optimism that I will immerse readers (including a*dultescents*) into the narrative, that I will guide them to assume the narrator's role, to join in the telling.

Reflecting upon my novel, interrogating my assumptions and practice, I channel imperative work to fashion awareness that

- issues affecting young adults are not drawn from a list
- speculative fiction or fantasy need not bear *N'reath-datisation* to thrive
- it is possible for a writer of short fiction to integrate a model of stories-within-a-story to build a novel.

I cannot help but question my approach of stories-within-a-story. Will future artefacts apply something more structured and traditionally robust: drawing board, mind-mapping, butcher paper, storyboarding, cue cards, the works?

As I scope, re-scope, rediscover all those 'questions driving my artefact' (Hecq 2009), I am clear that – for the artefact to fruitfully conclude – I must hunt a transformation arc that shifts the key players, that moves the reader from questioning which protagonist the story is about to finding curiosity on where all protagonists are headed.

I have a cunning plan unfurling in hope that I can generate elements of astonishing talent, sporadic and fragmented but multiple across the novel.

As you the reader savour the prose, as you are seduced start to end, you will fail to realise the novel has no queen plot.

Riding shotgun on this road trip with the characters of my novel, I smell their rawness, taste their normality in such otherworldliness, touch the rise and fall of their chests...magnified by silence.

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