Creative empathy: How writers turn experience not their own into literary non-fiction.

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

To my dear supervisor Professor Hugh Craig for all his unfailing support and encouragement and guidance on my beautiful journey, and for his belief in me as a person, and a student and a writer.

I would also like to thank Dr Keri Glastonbury who worked over and beyond the bounds of her duties as a supervisor to guide and encourage and help me grow as a creative nonfiction writer, and Associate Professor Jo May for her guidance and encouragement and support in the writing of the creative component to this exegesis.

As well, I would like to thank my long-suffering husband, Bob, who appears in the creative work to this thesis, the docu-memoir See Saw Margery Daw, just as he is, a man who keeps my feet on the ground and who takes me anywhere I wish to go for my work, and always supports my endeavours.

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See Saw Margery Daw
Abstract

The creative component to this thesis is a form of life writing which straddles both memoir and literary documentary. The writer-researcher interviews the subject for her or his unusual life-experience, and audio-tapes the discussion as resource material for a creative nonfiction docu-memoir. In a work of this type, the memoir is primarily not that of the writer, but that of the subject. The documentary component can take the form of photographs, and also factual elements which the subject mentions in relation to their experience, and which gives a documentary-type effect to their narrative.

My docu-memoir records the stories of seven subjects, five of whom are Forgotten Australians, of whom I am one. These people are of mainly Anglo-Celtic heritage, and were in care as children in Australia in the mid-part of the twentieth century. Two of the subjects are not Forgotten Australians, but one tells what it is like to be the long-lost sibling of a Forgotten Australian, and the other tells what it was like to have been a child in an orphanage in England so that, in my work, I can show that Australian orphanages were not greatly different to those in England, and the experience of being an incarcerated child was much the same regardless of geographical distance. The inclusion of all these people’s stories is intended to give a concise picture of the experience of being a Forgotten Australian: what it is like to be a “forgotten” and abused child, what it means as an adult to be a care-leaver, how their experiences have affected their lives and those of others around them, and how the experience and the effects of that are much the same no matter whether they were in care as children in England or in Australia. This is a story which has not been previously told from inside the group, in a literary work.

In the exegesis, I study what docu-memoir is, and how to write a creative nonfiction work and tailor it to my topic. As models for my own docu-memoir I chose the works of Tony Parker, and especially Lighthouse, Sheila Stewart’s three docu-memoirs, Country Kate, Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land, and Ramlin Rose: The Boatwoman’s Story, and Helen Garner’s Joe Cinque’s Consolation. From Parker and Stewart I learnt how to structure a docu-memoir of the type in which I am most interested, and various techniques that I could use when recreating the memories of others: such as, how to make the subjects in the work appear as real people, how to dwell on the metaphorical and philosophical in the words of people, and use the transcript material in a way that lets the subjects talk for themselves. From Garner I learnt how one might include oneself in the work as a point of reference for added credibility, and ways in which to enhance my work of nonfiction with creative elements like braiding the narratives with stories suggested by the subject matter, but which take the reader outside the interview situation, and use rhetoric to draw the reader into the literary landscape. From these writers I also learnt ways in which to maintain a code of ethics for a nonfiction writer when crafting a creative work of docu-memoir.