SETTING HISTORICAL FICTION ABLAZE WITH AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, ALLEGORY AND ADHD

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ABSTRACT

To advance autoethnography territory lines, I have conceived a research design that utilises allegory and extended metaphors to write a historical fiction novel and an exegesis. The contextual background derives from my memories of teaching at an Australian high school in the six months after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Australia in 2020, and the experiential effect of the State and Federal Government's policies in managing the COVID-19 pandemic on my professional life during this time. The novel is an allegory stemming from my examination of texts that foreground the teaching experiences of women, and establishes the continuity of the historical process of an exceptional situation from Australia's past (the Spanish Flu epidemic) to the present (the COVID-19 pandemic). In 2021, I received an attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder (ADHD) diagnosis that has provided another lens to analyse my memories, writing practice and novel. This article explains my research design and how I have used it to develop a form of creative and critical expression that has advanced my capacity to address personal and professional issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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KEYWORDS

Autoethnography–Allegory—Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder—Creative Practice—Extended Metaphor—Historical Fiction

Historical novels and the historical fiction genre first caught my attention in 1987 when I read LM Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Like Anne, I was an emotionally sensitive, excitable girl with a strong tendency to ruminate and affected by early parental loss. Happily, my new literary fixation whisked me out of the present moment whenever the demands of growing up pressed too heavily on my slight shoulders. Spurred by my love of reading, in adulthood I became a high-school English teacher though I blanched at the organisational gymnastics. Certainly, the classroom environment demanded my full attention to guide students through the stages of constructing and deconstructing texts. My school used Marzano's (2007) instructional framework as a whole-school approach to improving pedagogy. Attending the related in-school professional development sessions and receiving mentoring by experienced teachers honed my planning and self-reflecting skills. Adaptable and transferrable, these skills have also been invaluable for organising and executing this new study.

However, working at an Australian high school following the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival in 2020 re-sparked my urge to mentally escape: face-to-face teaching without access to effective personal protective equipment, among further stressors since validated by scholars (e.g., Collie, 2020; Dabrowski, 2020; Leask & Hooker, 2020; Wood, Griffiths & Crowley, 2021) terrified *and* thrilled me. For the final Friday period four lesson in December, I was low on creative fuel but scraped together a lesson out of ashes and embers and started with a meditation activity. Some students in the class were keen to shut their eyes and try the breathing exercises but one student was decidedly not. Hot four-lettered coals tumbled from his mouth and sizzled on the sparse terrain of my patience. Rejecting my rebuke, he stormed out. When the final bell rang, I stalked to my car nursing a heavy four-letter coal of my own: numb.

Again, I weighed historical fiction as a potential therapeutic outlet. In *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography* (2004), scholar Carolyn Ellis describes the elements required for personal and professional combustion:

> The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. Often you confront things about yourself that are less than flattering. Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts—and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore–that's when the real work begins. (Ellis, 2004, p. xviii)

Ellis's challenge appealed because I aimed to determine how the writing practice and a resulting novel might be useful as a form of creative and critical expression during an exceptional situation, i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic. To define, an exceptional situation is one where in the face of significant threat, authorities may declare a state of emergency, allowing them to enact legislation to protect society that also places restrictions on an individual's human rights (Brems, 2001; Greene, 2020). And so, I developed an autoethnographic creative writing practice that incorporated allegory and extended metaphors to inform historical fiction writing.

Unexpectedly, while writing the final chapter of the novel, I received a retrospective diagnosis of attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder (ADHD). My traits snapped into sharp focus—daydreaming, sensitivity, forgetfulness, impulsivity, anxiety. I re-examined the output of my writing practice through the diagnostic lens and found the implications substantial.

The complex ways ADHD manifests in me, a woman striving to become an academic, are recorded throughout the autoethnographic memory data recorded in my study's reflective and reflexive journals and are channelled through my novel's main characters' perspectives, feelings and actions. The aim of this article is to explain the hybrid design that underwent an ADHD renovation and illustrate with creative and exegetical excerpts so as to demonstrate the therapeutic benefits I experienced: feelings of empowerment, validation and amusement that replaced demoralisation, feeling overwhelmed and anxiety.

Entwined in the culture of a high school community

Secondary teaching equipped me with effective organisational strategies, a sense of purpose and belonging, and offered a dynamic, changeable workplace environment. Though, with hindsight, my then-undiagnosed ADHD produced challenges that pre-dated the arrival of COVID-19 in Australia. Patricia Quinn explains the symptoms of attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder in girls and women manifest as "forgetfulness, disorganization, low self-esteem, anxiety, and demoralization" (2005, p. 580). Internalised symptoms of hyperactivity take a toll and can lead to the development of co-morbid conditions such as anxiety and depression (Fuller-Thomson et al., 2016). These findings align with my decades-long lived experience. At work, I was frustrated by inexplicable feelings of being overwhelmed and anxiousness, and perfectionism. I did my best to conceal these emotions to protect my professional reputation. This tendency to try to cope regardless offers an insight as to why, as Cutting (2021) states, women often remain undiagnosed into adulthood.

The COVID-19 pandemic's emergence exacerbated my anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed and ability to focus. Cortese et al. assert "individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are particularly vulnerable to the distress caused by the pandemic" (2020, p. 412). In March 2020, cases of COVID-19 in the surrounding community triggered ruminations about dying that had bothered me since losing my mother to cancer. Conversely, I experienced excitement and increased energy when collaborating with colleagues to build an online learning platform for our students.

My literature review, commencing in 2021, focussed on the contextual background of teaching in 2020 and I sought to remain cognisant of the objectivity required for research while wrestling with retriggered anxiety-provoking emotions. The process validated and challenged my perspectives. For example, Shine (2020) claims that even before the pandemic, teachers' and principals' perceived news coverage of their

profession as negative, was an external stressor that affected their morale. Leask and Hooker (2020) determine when COVID-19 arrived in Australia, measures the Australian Federal Government might have taken to address the perceived risk to health for teachers, students and their families were not taken. Additionally, Dabrowski states "stress and burnout will likely increase now and beyond the pandemic" (2020, p. 37). However, Collie (2021) and Ocampo (2020) gave me pause to reflect that how I engaged with my workplace made an impact on its culture and my relationships within it. The culture and relationships within my workplace also impacted me. Collie (2021) finds school leaders can assist to alleviate teachers' adverse physical and emotional symptoms and promote resiliency by encouraging rather than foiling their self-determination. Front-line workers—including myself in 2020—were also aware of how their own perception of COVID-19 could impact those they cared for and coping methods were essential for maintaining outward calm (Ocampo, 2020). Ocampo (2020) identifies the coping methods participants reported as spontaneous activities fitted in around increased demands on workload. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a sustained creative writing practice was excluded. I tried not to think myself a rat prematurely abandoning a stalwart ship when I took leave to study: I wanted to possess a greater capacity for addressing the demands of a career in education, whether in the secondary or tertiary sector, before considering whether to re-embark.

In the meantime, selecting an appropriate methodology took precedence. Skains' (2018, p. 86) asserts creative practice-based-research, "is guided by a research question about art and the practice of it … to connect with others, to connect with ourselves … to push boundaries…", all concerns of my study. Creative practice as a methodology includes fiction-based research (Leavy, 2015). Furthermore Kara (2015) identifies instances of other scholars using arts-based techniques to explore challenging emotions, and states, 'autoethnography has huge potential for creativity' (p. 25). Adding an autoethnographic approach to the research design would propagate a concentric pattern of reflexivity that kept Skains (2018), Leavy (2015) and Kara's (2015) findings at its core.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is appropriate due to its association with creative writing and accessible research methods. Data gathering frameworks in foundational texts by Chang (2008), Ellis and Bochner (2000), Holman Jones et al., (2013), and Hughes and Pennington (2017) underpin my project. These pioneering scholars and Tombro (2016) provide self-reflective writing exercises and encourage examining artefacts such as photographs, diagrams, cultural objects, emails, and official documents to support memory data collection. However, while reading accounts of individuals who had encountered difficult situations and found solutions, trepidation arose as I weighed the vulnerability required for sharing my own. Scouring my memories of teaching at a secondary school during 2020 did generate 'emotional pain', as Ellis mentions (2004, p. xviii).

However, Chang (2008, p. 15) evokes imagery with her use of the word "web" to explain how culture forms through the interaction of individuals. I decided, then, not to extricate myself from the stickiness. I perused autoethnographies by Australian scholars who have explored the usefulness for their students, research participants and themselves. My enthusiasm grew due to the variety of creative forms these practitioners have used to express their findings [1]. I mused about how my collection of memory data could inform the writing of my historical fiction novel. The actual creative writing practice takes stylistic approaches into account, such as Todorov's narrative theory, particularly his five propositions: "equilibrium, force, disequilibrium, force, equilibrium" (Selden et al., 2005, p. 70) to structure the novel Todorov's narrative theory complements autoethnography due to its association with the writing of narratives.

Historical and political allegory

The alternating storylines of two main female characters named Annie and Laura drive my novel's plot. Set in 1919, Annie and Laura answer the call to assist at a volunteer organisation—the Women's Emergency Corps (WEC)—when Spanish influenza arrives in Queensland. The characters are allegorical, assigned to represent hidden socio-political significance, and conduits for fictionalising the memories of my teaching experiences. The WEC provides an allegorical setting to parallel the hierarchical structure of the modern high school and draw attention to echoing historical policies that continue to disadvantage women's employment opportunities. To define, a historical and political allegory is a narrative "in which the literal characters represent concepts and the plot allegorizes an abstract doctrine or thesis" (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p. 7). Governmental leaders' edicts in 2020 echoed their historical predecessors' management of the Spanish influenza epidemic in 1919 by calling on women for courage to be selfless and care for those in their local communities who fell ill. Contemporarily, those employed in the teaching profession—acknowledged as feminised by The Senate of Australia (2017)—were mandated to attend their onsite workplace to provide supervision to the children of essential workers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Morrison, 2020; Spalding, 2020; Wood et al., 2021).

Historical fiction has a place in educating the public about the past (Addey, 2021). Addey (2021, p. 3) points out, "all historical records have visible gaps". Fiction becomes a necessity, whereby the author uses research and imagination to bring the pieces together. This approach became necessary, as Hodgson (2017) states that, despite rigorous research, accounts of the women who volunteered at the WEC were difficult to find. As a result, I read historical newspaper accounts sourced from *Trove*, the National Library of Australia's online research portal, and government documents held at the Queensland State Archives (QSA) to gain better understanding of the cultural customs and legal restrictions imposed on society in 1919 to develop accurate representations of characters and settings. At the QSA, I unearthed applications from teachers who nominated themselves to care for the sick (Department of Public

Instruction Queensland, 1919). A note later clipped to several original forms informed me some teacher applicants succumbed to the Spanish flu. To honour these real-life heroines, I named my main characters after two of them, Laura and Annie. It must be noted that I did not attempt to reconstruct these women's stories. Rather, in my novel, an Annie and a Laura are drawn to volunteer at their local Women's Emergency Corps (WEC), a volunteer organisation that provided care to members of the public struck down with Spanish influenza [2]. The 100-year gap between each era provided me with an emotional firebreak as I channelled the perspectives, feelings and actions of my own 2020 experiences through the two characters. I propose that reimagining the experiences of the WEC women volunteers fills the pockmarks left by traditionally patriarchal historical accounts and holds up a mirror to contemporary society about the work still to be done to address inequity faced by those working in feminised professions.

Each novel chapter fictionalises one of the entries recorded in my reflective journal to shape the narrative arc. Gibbs and Okonski (2017, p. 33) argue "allegory is not just an art form, but emerges from meaningful patterns in everyday life in which people connect their mundane actions to larger symbolic themes". Journalling alongside writing the novel, I became less preoccupied with perceived indignities such as the risk to health and the measures I took to protect myself. Instead, my thoughts turned to accomplished tasks and the collaborative value of the relationships I had formed in my workplace. I recognised that expectations to nurture my students' mental and physical wellbeing had pushed at me from external factors, but also originated from my own internalised values. I examined my self-soothing methods to test whether they were productive or maladaptive, and understood the ways in which I imbibed them to better preserve a sense of wellbeing as I continued serving. Channelling memory data through the perspectives, feelings and actions of fictional characters provided an emotional buffer. As an autoethnography researcher scrutinising and sharing my own relevant experience, I aimed to lend authenticity to a fictionalised story about historical women who had experienced similar conditions. While undertaking the historical research component of my design I experienced excitement, validation and amusement due to uncovering so many likenesses between the two eras.

The extended metaphor

Though Abrams and Harpham (2009, p. 119) initially define a metaphor as "a word or expression that in literal usage denotes one kind of thing is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing, without asserting a comparison". In *Metaphors we live by* (1980, p. 4), Lakoff and Johnson's analogy "Argument is war" resonated as I considered how to illustrate the mundaneness and complexity of the activities I carried out while teaching in 2020. Throughout my novel, embedded militaristic terminology serves as an ontological metaphor to highlight self-perceived pressure to get on with the job and be part of a team while battling fears about a potential risk to health. I also referenced the militaristic vernacular used by Australian political leaders at both the historical and contemporary junctures of 1919 and 2020. Lakoff and Johnson's

explanation in chapter five "Metaphor and cultural coherence" (1980, p. 22-24) complement my autoethnographic approach. To explain, I simultaneously reflectively journalled and conducted historical research of the events that occurred in 1919 that correlated with events in 2020.

In my reflective journal, I identified references to several objects denoted by varying shades of yellow. According to Doran (2013, p. 6), "historically, in Western Culture, yellow is the color [sic] of light … but it is also the colour of death". My journal references attached similar cultural and/or emotional significance to the objects and to a specific societal topic of concern in 2020. The anti-Asian attitude adhering to "'yellow peril' stereotype'" that surfaced with the emergence of coronavirus in Wuhan was one example with a negative connotation (Li & Nicholson, 2021, p. 2). In Australia, individuals of Chinese appearance were subjected to instances of verbal and physical abuse (Ballantyne & Giarrusso, 2023; Kassam & Hsu, 2021). Another illustration hails from newspaper accounts available on *Trove* of yellow flags flown by incoming ships that signified passengers aboard were carriers of an infectious disease. Paradoxically, my staffroom at school had a large yellow feature wall, a symbolic House colour to encourage belonging and team spirit. I also recollected my happiness at the end of a busy school day when I walked past a flowering allamanda vine planted beside my home then was greeted at the door by my faithful yellow Labrador Retriever. Using characterisation, setting and theme, I embedded these various representations of the colour yellow throughout the novel for the characters to interact with, to metaphorically illustrate the emotional complexity that arose within me while teaching in 2020. In this application, my use of yellow provides an alternative sample of "how the ontological metaphor 'The mind is an entity' is elaborated in our culture" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 27).

I also established a "personification" metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 33-34)—in the novel, Laura owns a bicycle. Riding it helps her inspect her internal sense of restlessness (a self-experiential manifestation of the ADHD trait of hyperactivity) and supports her bid to escape working in the WEC kitchen by casting her as suitable to courier meals to the sick. Lastly, as defined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 29-30), I constructed "container' metaphors"—"land areas" such as streets and the WEC and "visual fields" within which each main character reflects on nature's minutiae to ground themselves. While developing my metaphors, a sense of empowerment and validation cultivated itself within me. The extension of my chosen metaphors became my preferred "mode of philosophy" (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p. 192). Confidence to creatively and critically express myself bloomed.

A woman's place is at the chalkface

In my novel excerpt below, the second of the two main characters Miss Laura Baylis is conversing with a male character named Mr Richard Talbot. Ordinarily Talbot holds the position of head teacher at the school where the WEC is now erected. Presently, he is overseeing the Boy's Bicycle Brigade made up of his senior male pupils. Though

Talbot is a stickler for upholding rules, he has made one exception for Laura. He has talked the WEC leader—a woman named Mrs Matilda Horn—into letting Laura join the Boys Bicycle Brigade. Mr Talbot's and Laura's working relationship is prone to miscommunication and frustration. With the excerpt, my intention was to illustrate the banter I engaged in with colleagues to alleviate my fears about catching COVID-19 in 2020. The dialogue also encapsulates one of the challenges my ADHD causes for me—trying to stay focussed if the discussion topic doesn't hold my interest.

Mr Talbot is an allegorical representation of the Department of Education whereas Mrs Horn represents the female triad of Queensland's senior government officials in 2020—Minister for Education Grace Grace, Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk and Chief Health Officer Dr Jeannette Young. To recall, these three government officials fronted press conferences on our television screens to explain the latest health regulations, learning conditions for students, and the overnight COVID-19 death tally. Lastly, Mr Talbot nicknames Mrs Horn '*The Bugle*' because she rounds the volunteers up for regular meetings to make announcements and give instructions. The characters (like I did in 2020) find attending meetings tedious as Mrs Horn leaves no room for negotiation and valuable time is consumed that could otherwise be spent working.

Chapter seven: No man's land

"Catch!" In quick succession Richard Talbot threw an exercise book and a pencil at Laura.

She caught one in each hand.

"Quite the reflexes you have there, Miss Baylis."

"Thank you," she said and tucked the book and pencil into her bicycle basket for safe keeping.

"Don't lose them," Mr Talbot added. "I was lucky *The Bugle* was willing to part with them."

Laura glanced over his shoulder and rounded her eyes.

Mr Talbot froze. "She's not behind me, is she? She is?"

Laughter bubbled up in Laura and she couldn't contain it.

Mr Talbot's shoulders sagged. "Don't ever do that to me again," he scolded.

Laura offered him an olive branch. "What does Mrs Horn think of this new nickname you've bestowed on her?"

"She doesn't know about it yet."

"Mm," Laura replied. A picture of a blue-painted letterbox with the number twenty-eight on it popped into her mind, or was it meant to be twenty-seven? Oh, *pack up your troubles tra – la – la - la and …*

The words flowing out of Mr Talbot's mouth lapped gently at the edge of her thoughts.

"I tell you it wasn't easy persuading Matilda to let you join the …"

Laura shook her head. *Smile, smile, smi*—damn song, go away.

"… but I used my charm and …"

Mr Talbot's lips had stopped moving. He was staring at her.

"Sorry, could you please repeat that last little bit?" she asked, averting her gaze.

"Was I boring you, Miss Baylis?"

Her cheeks grew hot. She shook her head and forced herself to look him in the eye. The truth was Mr Talbot's slow ramble had sent her mind racing back out on patrol. As her body stayed rooted to the spot in front of him, she'd been mentally pedaling down the streets looking out for white cards in people's front windows and recalling house numbers on their letterboxes. Meanwhile, that confounded war ditty remained stuck on its torturous loop inside her head.

Mr Talbot did not repeat himself but by the self-satisfied way he tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, Laura knew he'd won his debate with Mrs Horn. She was grateful to be joining the bicycle brigade. If the man wanted to call their W.E.C. leader a bugle or a trumpet or even a jolly tuba, she wouldn't be the one telling him to stop.

"Do you think the nickname will catch on?" she asked.

A grin slowly spread across Mr Talbot's face and Laura knew she was forgiven.

"It already has. The ladies in the kitchen love it."

Did they? Laura wondered. Or, faced with another one of the head teacher's enthusiastic schemes had they simply grinned and borne it, as a woman was wont to do?

A neurodivergent tangent complements the autoethnographic approach

My ADHD diagnosis occurred during the writing of the final chapter of the novel. This tangent was, to me, amusingly representative of my non-linear thought processes, and thrilling because as Youmshajakian and Timms (2022, Costly and under-researched,

para. 8) write, "biases in [ADHD] research [and] complexities specific to women have barely been explored". Here, I had unwittingly produced a writing practice that laid bare a variety of 'complexities' yet was strengths-based; with my associated perspectives, feelings and reactions recorded and analysed the autoethnographic approach became transformative. I agree with Solden (2005) and Hallowell and Ratey (2011) that the ADHD label is misleading; there is not a deficit of attention; the problem is the regulation of it. Strengths are "a surplus of ideas, creativity, excitement, and interest" (Solden, 2005, Detailed breakdown of what AD/HD is, para 1). Though I built my multi-faceted research design pre-diagnosis, it fostered an environment for my "surplus of ideas" to productively interconnect. Solden and Frank (2019) are proponents of using a strengths-based model for harnessing the useful symptoms of the condition and learning to forgive ourselves when challenges arise. It is impossible to ignore the impact ADHD has had on my creative practice. Evidence of the associated traits and behaviours are recorded in my memory data, which in turn are channelled through the novel's main character's perspectives, feelings and actions.

Conclusion

The objective of my study has been to test the usefulness of an autoethnographic writing practice that utilises allegory and an extended metaphor as a form of critical and creative expression. I identified strategies I used for coping during my teaching contextual background and throughout my study and examined them for their usefulness. Realising that I had done so as a woman living with the confounding struggles of undiagnosed ADHD has enhanced the feeling of transformation and empowerment that using an autoethnographic approach produces. Channelling these experiences through fictional characters to represent the silent voices of historical women as well as my own has provided a sense of validation due to many shared similarities. By creatively reimagining the outcomes of perceived injustices I am now endowed with a deep sense of amusement that has subverted the challenging feelings and reactions recorded in my reflective journal into healthier, more adaptive ones. Importantly, through scrutiny of my own engagement with the culture and relationships of my educational workplace—a deeply subjective undertaking—I now have a better sense of objectivity regarding my contribution. Lastly, through using the autoethnographic approach, the novel's characters demonstrate perspectives, feelings and reactions of a woman living with ADHD while working during an exceptional situation. These traits propel the plot forward in a narrative arc befitting of the historical fiction genre. Therefore, the hybrid design advances the territory lines of experimentation using autoethnography, and provides a qualitative account for scholars researching the lived experience of ADHD women—individuals whose excitably, sensitivity, and daydreams spark creative ideas that may require a supportive puff of air to set off a blaze.

End Notes

1. These creative forms include three-dimensional autoethnographic sculptures (Anae, 2014), an exo-autoethnography that investigates a paternal experience of war and inherited intergenerational trauma (Denejikina, 2017), an autoethnography about teaching in the Australian Outback (Ernst & Vallack, 2015), using Bakhtin's Carnival to fictionalise teaching experiences (Mead, 2017), creative writing research that respectively encompasses lyric essay, fictocritical screen play, playwriting, and listening as research (Sempert et. al., (2017) and writing creative non-fiction about an experimentation with autoethnography articles that reinforces the connection between mind and body (Tuinamuana & Yoo, 2020).

2. WEC volunteers were tasked with cooking and delivering meals, caring for the children of the afflicted and tending to invalids in their homes. For more information see Boynton-Bricknell et al. (2020); *Brisbane Courier* (1919)*; Daily Mail* (1919); Hobbins (2020); Hodgson (2017); *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (1919); State Library of Queensland (2009); Wengert (2018).

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