

# (UN)MASKING AUTHENTICITY: CREATIVE

## WRITING AND THE MASK

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### ABSTRACT

In the realms of literature and creative writing, there is a unique legitimacy conferred upon works which are seen as 'authentic'. This results in a hierarchical organisation of styles and genres which exists external and prior to any individual text. This paper explores the claim to authenticity of 'realist' literary fiction in Australia and attempts to challenge that hierarchy from the perspective of Nietzsche's work on the concept of the mask. Central to this argument is an analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle* and its awareness of the relationship between truth and illusion.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kieran Stevenson is an award-winning Melbourne-based writer of novels and short fiction. His research is focused on the boundaries of genre and the literary in the novel form.

### KEYWORDS

Mask—Authenticity—Realism—Genre—Vonnegut—Fiction

‘[...] like most sci-fi, the book will disappoint any reader who insists on the evolving, three dimensional characters of the realist novel.’

(Kunkel 2008: viii)

I was looking at Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Cat’s Cradle* (2008, first published 1963) in the hope of building a critique of the idea of ‘authentic’ fiction when I read the introduction by American novelist Benjamin Kunkel. What catches the eye initially is the careful unkindness of it; one could be forgiven for thinking that Kunkel is not really fond of the novel at all. He devotes some energy to cataloguing what are, in his opinion, the weakest components of both the book and science-fiction generally. He speaks only guardedly about the virtues of the genre and even then, he takes pains to tell the reader that there are other science-fiction authors far more capable than Vonnegut, who had died the year before Kunkel was contracted to write his introduction. So it goes.

With the propriety of such an introduction to one side, what’s really important is the territory it attempts to stake out. It uses as its critical foundation a quote by Fredric Jameson, which addresses the ‘conventionality, *inauthenticity* [...] [and] formal stereotyping’ of science-fiction (Kunkel 2008: xi). By making a quick series of claims for ‘realist’ fiction—evolving, three-dimensional, authentic, indeed even the term ‘realist’ is heavy with connotations—Kunkel is attempting to establish realist fiction as a sort of formal centre, a neutral ground from which the so-called genres diverge. Vonnegut’s novel, in contrast with Kunkel’s own work, is not ‘realist’, and therefore cannot be realistic or real, neither truly weighty nor deep except *in spite* of the limitations of its genre. It is important to note that when I speak of ‘realist’ fiction I am interpreting Kunkel’s use of the term, which seems to derive largely from the current formulation of the genres. I am not speaking of the nineteenth century movements, nor any one school or historical categorisation of literature. I am speaking only of fiction which seeks to present things ‘as they are’—absent fantastical elements, strange settings, or implausible plots. While for Kunkel and many others today this may be aligned with artistic credibility, it is interesting to note that many writers and theorists associated with earlier

formulations of the term disputed this stricture. In ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1894), Henry James writes ‘humanity is immense, and reality has many forms’ (1894: 387 – 388) in response to the suggestion that writers should aim for exactitude only in line with their personal experience. In ‘A Note on Realism’ (2012), Robert Louis Stevenson writes of ‘the truth of literary art’ that ‘it may be told to us in a carpet comedy, in a novel of adventure, or a fairy tale’. ‘Be as ideal or as abstract as you please,’ he writes. ‘You will be none the less veracious’. For these writers, and for past conceptions of ‘realism’, richness of detail and serious care of thought were the key to artistic value, not mere resemblance. For Kunkel and the version of realism he champions, the two have become confused. Resemblance—to the real world, to real people, to real situations—is depth, richness, and meaning. Vonnegut’s work is, for Kunkel, largely conflated with science-fiction as a whole, which in its separation from resemblance offers only a ‘small group of novels with a permanent place in American fiction’ (2008: xii). The implication is clear enough: all of the formal, stylistic and narrative choices of ‘non-realist’ fiction are diversions, masks of varying purpose placed over the ‘authentic’ domain of this contemporary realist fiction, which implicitly speaks in the natural voice, with natural characters, and explores natural themes and settings. I intend to put forward another idea: in no real sense is realist fiction different from the wilfully unrealistic. These non-realist works do employ masks to denote and foreground a territory so that they might reveal something to us. But whatever they’re obscuring, it’s not authenticity. On the contrary, this particular formulation of authenticity is just another mask.

It might seem like an odd choice to use an American sci-fi novel to open an exploration of literary realism today, but *Cat’s Cradle* speaks directly to the question of truth in literature. It has its eyes wide open to the inherent inauthenticity of human stories. The first words the reader sees after Kunkel’s introduction are: ‘Nothing in this book is true’ (2008: introductory page). The story of the novel is pervaded by a fictional religion called Bokononism. ‘The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this: ‘All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies’ (2008: 4). Vonnegut immediately sets up this recursive loop of self-referential paradoxes between his novel and its sham religion, destabilising the distinction between what is true and false, and he

foregrounds this theme at every opportunity. The story is set on the fictional Caribbean island of San Lorenzo, a mish-mash caricature of impoverished nations which runs on a dynamic tension intentionally manufactured by its dictator ‘Papa’ Monzano and its holy man, Bokonon. The religion is outlawed: nobody on the island will admit to being a Bokononist, but everybody is, including ‘Papa’. As one character says, all the people on the island are ‘employed full time as actors in a play they [understand], that any human being anywhere could understand and applaud’ (2008: 124). It is clear that Vonnegut is not just talking about San Lorenzo. The whole book is replete at every turn with new ironies and untruths that highlight the inherently and obviously *constructed* ways we navigate a harsh reality. It is when we try to act on the grounds of some transcendental truth and deny that a concomitant untruth has been with us the whole time that we are taken advantage of and robbed of our only genuine path to agency. Newt Hoenikker, one of the characters in the book, mounts a cynical attack on the titular children’s game, where string is looped over the fingers in a kind of net. “No wonder kids grow up crazy”, he says. “A cat’s cradle is nothing but a bunch of X’s between somebody’s hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X’s ... no damn cat, and no damn cradle” (2008: 118). It is his refrain for every lie that presents itself as authentic—his sister’s abusive marriage presented as idyllic, his own childhood of neglect presented as loving. “See the cat?” asks Newt. “See the cradle?” (2008: 128). One of the novel’s darkest jokes about the violence that lurks within the gaps of truth is one of its most offhand. An American industrialist, fed up with the rebellious minds of his American workers, is going to San Lorenzo to open a factory. “The people down there’, he says, ‘are poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough to have some common sense!” (2008: 64). Vonnegut sees clearly what Kunkel does not: a story which claims unique certainty of truth only differs from one which does not in its attempt to seize the mantle of authority and authenticity.

It could be argued that some Australian literary institutions share Kunkel’s preoccupation with this realist ‘authenticity’, albeit in their own way. If the Miles Franklin Award can be taken as a somewhat accurate yardstick for the state of the national literature given its stated function of designating ‘successful’ Australian novels, and novels which are successfully Australian, it

paints a definite picture. While non-realist works frequently make the shortlist, with very few exceptions the novels which have won the award embody my use of the term 'realist' fiction. There have been exceptions; some of the prize-winners have departed with the default format and played with alternative forms of the literary novel—the high modernism of Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) or the experimentalism of David Ireland's novels, for example—but these points of departure remain just that, eventually subsumed back into the persistent thread of naturalistic literary realism. There is one opposing thread to this which continues today, whereby the winning books by Indigenous authors, such as Alexis Wright, have broken with this particular realism either in style or content. These books explore Aboriginal storytelling traditions or use non-realist elements to throw the issues facing Aboriginal people into sharper relief. A suitably thorough analysis of this particular break is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, important to note the significant political connotations of this separation and to highlight that suggesting that novels by Aboriginal authors are not bound by the strictures of traditional settler-Australian realism is absolutely not to suggest that they are free from their own strict parameters when considered as examples of the national literature.

It should be said that using the Miles Franklin as a foundation here is not comprehensive or damning in and of itself; it is as much a look at the workings of prize culture and its effects on the industry of literature as it is an investigation of the state of the art. However, hidden within its twin claims to rewarding presentations of 'Australian life in any of its phases' and to being the country's 'most prestigious literature prize' (Miles Franklin Literary Award 2017: para. 1) are two others: that it is an authority on what constitutes an authentic presentation of Australian life, and that its judgment on artistic value is unmatched. This creates a feedback loop, dictating what gets read, reviewed, sold and therefore published. It sits atop the system with which writers are forced to negotiate, and in its selection process it has broadly privileged a particular kind of realist work as representative of the ideal, *authentically* Australian novel. Whether intentional or not, this sends a message in harmony with Kunkel's: there is the serious, realist work that makes up the canon, and there is the rest.

What can be seen in the attempt by industry authorities like the Miles Franklin to put together an authentic Australian realist literature is a collective anxiety over identity and authority. Canadian literary theorist Terry Goldie, in an investigation of Australian literary hoaxes and imposture, talks about the endless turning point white Australians find themselves in, identifying as native but alienated from the Indigenous population, therefore identifying as migrant but also alienated from migrant communities due to the aforementioned identification as native (2004: 96 – 98). He links this to our truncated emancipation from the British Empire and what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra call the ‘bastard complex’—Hodge and Mishra note that the common colloquial and affectionate use of the term ‘bastard’ in Australia suggests an attempt to ‘[affirm] illegitimacy in order to evade an anxiety about origins’ (2004: 97). Goldie writes:

It is important to create an Australian who can be the authority of being Australian; and yet the authorised Australian has traits which both oppose and deny authority: it is difficult to be authentically Australian when the authentic Australian is likely to be opposed to authenticity (2004: 96).

Goldie observes in Australian literary efforts the irresolvable attempt to find our own skin—childlike or mature, native or migrant, independent or vestigial. We are looking for the right mask to wear. From this viewpoint, the emergent ‘authentic’ realist Australian body of work makes sense: it is false bravado, a defensive statement of identity in the face of the fear that we might be nothing at all. When such uncertainty reigns, it may make sense to attempt a grounding gesture, a dismissal of any work which seems unconcerned with reinforcing the concrete terms of Australian life. However, this gesture itself reinforces the mistaken realist claim that resemblance is aligned with reality, with the *Real* and what’s *really* going on.

But what would writing on the Real actually entail? A Lacanian Real, that which is external to our perceived symbolic reality, what Žižek terms an ‘inherent point of failure for symbolisation’ (2000: 121), is not the concern of realist fiction. The Real in this sense is only bound to contemporary realist literature in the same sense that it is bound to and underpins *any* symbolic

construction of language, including the most ‘unrealistic’ of fiction. In truth we cannot write it. More than that, this constructed realism tends to not even approach it. The staggering cosmic violence and insubstantiality underpinning everything, the irresolvable rupture between the symbolic we experience and the reality we inhabit, these things we feel whispering at the edges of our capacity for perception and expression—they are most often well outside our particular cultural field of view. Other canons have works which grapple with these ideas, to the extent that they can; McCarthy’s ‘sacred violence’ or the abject voids of Beckett’s novels are examples which arguably try to get at the Real through decidedly otherworldly realities. However, they too suffer in their nature from the reduction of subjectivity and symbolism and, returning to Zizek and Lacan, are perhaps ‘*touch[ing]* the real through the symbolic’ (2000: 121), but not speaking from within it. So we are stymied again. Even by attacking the Real we can only end up with another flawed formulation if we try to use the term ‘realism’: one based on *concept* rather than *resemblance*, and arguably therefore more philosophically robust but no more *truthful*, no more ‘real’. If our current, broadly Kunkelian iteration of realism is to be taken seriously in its claims to reality, it must be weighed in this fashion against the Real. And if it is, then we see again: there is no cat. There is no damn cradle.

So if the cultural privileging of common realism as Australia’s default form doesn’t actually speak to the Real, what is it doing? If anything, it seeks to establish a sort of democracy of perception in order to safeguard *against* the Real. The resulting consensus, which it must be emphasised again is mostly established in retrospect rather than at the moment of writing, serves to affirm a cultural mood, a safe way of being and a sort of touchstone in that frantic and circuitous search for the self. It represents a mutual ratification—between awards panels, critics, authors, booksellers and a shrinking readership—of a so-called ‘real world’ and an accepted ontological mode. It is a productive mask: it allows us to stake claim to a territory where we can safely produce, but it also demarcates clearly the limits of our collective investment in who we are and what aspects of ourselves we are willing to examine and challenge. These limits have changed over time, almost entirely for the better, broadening our gallery of voices and stories, but just because the common ground has expanded its membership it does not mean that it has fundamentally changed

the method of its operation. Works which fall outside this common ground are still seen as 'inauthentic', with all the implicit emptiness that term suggests.

While Australia's particular anxious realist journey might have its own quirks, it proceeds on the basis of a ubiquitous mechanism—all creative writing involves the fashioning and wearing of masks, specifically a Nietzschean masking, the notion that we reveal more profound things by the ways we choose to conceal ourselves than by our search for 'truth'. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes: 'Everything that is profound loves the mask; the profoundest things of all hate even image and parable' (1990: 69). Here again we find the Lacanian Real, resisting symbolisation. The seed idea at the base of this is explicated simply by Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Nietzsche in *What is Philosophy*: 'Thought is *creation*, not will to truth' (1994: 54, emphasis mine). For Nietzsche, creative thought is not a path to an objective and universal truth beneath the surface of things. Wherever one claims to have reached this truth, there is always more waiting to be unearthed, a gap into which everything unspoken and unspeakable can fit (1990: 216). Returning for a moment to *Cat's Cradle*, we can see that Vonnegut understands, perhaps better than Kunkel, how things are revealed through masks. One of the characters in the book is a professional indexer. She is able to discern simply from reading the index of a local history book the author's deepest secrets: that he is in love with the dictator's daughter, but he will never marry her because he is also secretly gay. "Never index your own book", says the indexer (2008: 87). The author has tried to hide himself behind an objective historical text, and in so doing has revealed himself. Nietzsche knows that this is always the case: 'Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy', he writes. 'Every opinion is also a hiding-place, every word also a mask' (1990: 216).

If the individual writer is enacting this movement, masking and revealing based on creative thought rather than truth, then the collective construct of the 'realist' novel becomes a categorisation after the fact, a logical error which, per Deleuze, mistakes the 'resemblance of the many' for the 'permanence of the One' (2014: 160). In this case it sets up a sort of Platonic ur-novel which cannot exist but to which we constantly refer and compare. The resultant categorisation commits two injustices: it fails to recognise the singular life at

the heart of each individual work *within* the category of realist fiction in the same breath that it claims privileged position for itself and holds the non-realist at arms' length. There is a strange sort of generic flattening that results: the realists of the world become practitioners of a proud tradition, varying in technique but essentially completing the same task of the 'truthful' work. The others, the Kafkas and Shelleys, are always *divergent* from this centre: bizarre outliers that crop up to destabilise things. Where they congregate in great enough numbers to threaten the realist paradigm, a schism occurs and a parallel, inferior offshoot is created: Magical Realism, Speculative Fiction, Horror, and so on. Mary Shelley was simply an author until it became necessary that she be erroneously labelled one of a score of different alleged inventors of science-fiction. This is not unique: Ursula Le Guin has stated her desire that 'somebody, somewhere, sometime, just talk about [her] as an American novelist' (Phillips 2012), and for his part Vonnegut said 'I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labelled 'science fiction'... and I would like out, since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal' (2014: 1). This protest against inferior categorisation is important. When identifying a crucial flaw in the Platonic project, Deleuze notes: 'Socrates distinguishes himself from the Sophist, but the Sophist does not distinguish himself from Socrates, placing the legitimacy of such a distinction in question' (2014: 163). While there are indeed those for whom the title of 'genre writer' is a comfortable fit, for as long as the genres have existed in concept there have been those who have seen it as an external imposition, a wilfully reductive prefix designed to separate and minimise.

The crucial thing, especially given how much this imposition of authenticity relies on industrial and institutional curation long after a work has already been produced, is the question of what this says about writing. My point is certainly not that stories outside the realist style should be privileged above those within it, or that realistic elements should be avoided by writers. If this inquiry is hoping for anything, it's an elevation of sidelined forms and styles to equal realism in the communal consciousness. Or better yet, the abolition of these categories—even if only temporarily within the writer themselves—to allow a natural flow between them where previously they have been limited, so that we might enjoy an inherent freedom at the beginning of writing to

approach each piece with a view to how it can best be brought to bear, rather than best exemplify any notion of what is ‘correct’ in form or style. It is certain that while the collection and designation of authentic and inauthentic work is done en masse and after the fact, these categorical actions have a self-reinforcing influence on the production of future work in a way that can only be limiting. As a principle of process, awareness of this false authenticity dynamic can be incorporated as a sort of reminder of potential. The hope is that our continued thread of national literature, such as it is, can make space alongside itself for our own Vonnegut or Le Guin to emerge without the threat of minimisation, because if a ‘national identity’ as such is to emerge organically within our literature, it is impossible to expect that there will be individual books which perfectly represent that identity. It must be polyvocal in nature, the harmony created by numerous stories embodying only themselves. Nascent publisher Brow Books is one example of this emergence already taking place: Briohny Doyle’s *The Island Will Sink* (2016) and Shaun Prescott’s *The Town* (2017), the first a cli-fi dystopian novel and the second a surrealistic take on the well-worn topic of small-town Australian life, represent wilful breaks from the idea of realism as the only way to write or sell a serious book. It is up to industry bodies like the Miles Franklin Award to enable this movement. It is my opinion that should Australian literature wish to survive, these shifts are inevitable, as the publishing industry seeks to accommodate a generation of writers raised in the era of globalisation, writers who have had unprecedented access to works across a vast field of genre, style and point of origin.

The second line of *Cat’s Cradle*, directly beneath the disclaimer that nothing within the book is true, is taken from the *Books of Bokonon*. It reads: ‘live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy’ (2008: introductory page). *Foma* is one of many made-up Bokononist terms. It means ‘harmless untruths’. It can only be through an awareness of how inherently *un-real* the writing act is—as with almost everything we do—that we can truly be said to be engaging in honest practice. Perhaps we can take a cue from Vonnegut and be unafraid of approaching very serious ideas without taking the method of our approach too seriously. Another term from Bokononism is *granfalloon*. It designates a team of people whose basis for association is meaningless, and it is a classic mechanism of limitation and control. Examples

given by Vonnegut are political parties, companies, and 'any nation, anytime, anywhere' (2008: 65). One could proffer other examples: 'realist' fiction, for one, or any artistic moment with the audacity to offer itself as the one and only real deal.

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