

WRITING BIOGRAPHICAL FICTION: WHAT IS LEFT OVER AFTER?

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ABSTRACT

Biographical fiction narratives—often of famous artists—have, claims David Lodge (2014), become ‘a fashionable form of literary fiction’. Yet in writing about famous people, the novelist is most often faced with countless biographies and archival materials in letters, literary notes, diaries, and in the works (and reviews) of the subject author/artist themselves, to say nothing of the academic scholarship surrounding the subject and their work. The problem for the novelist then in researching their subject, is where to draw the line. This paper examines the challenge for biographical fiction writers in imagining the lives of their subjects beyond that which has been documented—the ‘what is left over’, after reading the extant literature. The paper’s focus is on my own work in progress: a biographical novel about the life of the South African writer and social theorist, Olive Schreiner.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Janice Caulfield is a PhD candidate in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry, Curtin University. She has embraced creative writing, in particular, biographical and historical fiction, as a medium to explore the history of social and political thought. Her non-fiction book, *A Victorian Lady’s Journey to New Zealand* (2014) was published by Ngaio Press, Martinborough. In 2018 she was a recipient of a Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers’ Centre Residential Award.

KEYWORDS

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It is perhaps unsurprising that the postmodern turn in the literary fiction genre should see an outpouring of biographical novels. Encouraged by the deconstruction of conventional modes of biography and, at the same time, recognising the reading public's hunger for what is real or true, many novelists have taken, as their subject, artistic lives from history. In the space of just a few years, for example, there have been four novels written about the writer, Henry James (Lodge 2014), and five novels about Virginia Woolf (Latham 2012). Defining 'bio-fiction' is easier than locating where it sits in the literary fiction canon. It has been called a hybrid and a crossover genre because it takes a life (or a slice of life) of a real person from history, casting them as the novel's main protagonist. Ina Schabert (1982) was perhaps the first literary scholar of this period to open debate on the fictional genre, particularly in its relation to conventional biography. More recently, in Australia, James Vicars has grasped the nettle to analyse the form and to draw our attention to the very wide cast of literary output in this country that could be termed bio-fictions (2018). Michael Lackey's (Lackey 2016, 2017, 2018) three volumes of collected commentary on the genre provide us with both an extensive list of recently published bio-fictions and what novelists themselves think about their work. Whether metafictional or realist interpretations of real lives, it seems biographical fiction is one important literary expression of the postmodern zeitgeist.

Before offering a perspective from practice in researching for a biographical novel, I would like to consider some observations made by a number of literary critics about bio-fiction's worth as fiction. In an interview with the novelist, Damon Galgut, *The Economist's* literary critic put to him that the judges on the Man Booker considered biographical fiction, on an imaginative scale, somewhat less than other fiction (2015). It was the reason, she suggested, that Colm Toibin's novel (2004) about Henry James, went no further than the shortlist. In defence of his bio-fiction *Arctic Summer* (2014) about the novelist, E.M. Forster, Galgut says 'there are things we know sparsely about (Forster's) life, blank areas of the interior' (2015). Galgut draws on cryptic notes in Forster's diaries, and on scenes within Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, to imagine this interior life. Galgut invokes a bodily metaphor to explain his understanding of the genre: 'The biographies are the bones; the imagination is the tissue'. He says of his novel, 'I don't know if it's true, but I believe it is'. Colm Toibin, by contrast, rejects the notion that he has written anything other than a literary work of fiction (2018), while at the same time keeping faith with what is known from the facts about the life of Henry James.

Published in the same year as Toibin's novel was David Lodge's bio-fiction about Henry James (2004). Commenting on Lodge's work, Alan Hollinghurst says 'one comes to feel that as a novel it is limited by its artless closeness to biography' (2004). Tellingly, Lodge is the only novelist of these three contemporary writers to add the disclaimer 'a Novel' to the cover. The literary

critic, John Mullan, in comparing these two bio-fictions about Henry James, praises Toibin's novel for its 'elegant and self-censoring narrative', adding a qualifier; '... it is as good an example of the genre as you could wish for' (2005). Of David Lodge's rendition, Mullan says, 'you cannot help suspecting that Lodge's novel is likely to be the more reliable', by which I guess he means 'trusted'. In the same breath, Mullan is concerned that 'the more (biographical fiction) stacks up its evidence, its sources, its academic credentials, the more it condemns itself to a secondary status' (2005). So the dilemma, for at least this critic, seems to be between status and trust, while for other critics, it seems to be about proximity to or distance from the biographical record.

When I started on my research journey, I was advised to begin by reading all the Schreiner biographies. I was surprised (shocked may be a more apt descriptor) to discover at least eight extant biographies (Burdett 2001). Plus, I discovered scores of scholarly articles about Schreiner the woman and her art. I also found numerous theses written about my subject, or at least including her in broader thematic works such as late Victorian feminism. I uncovered one play, but was unable to find a single novel written about her. This, at least, was encouraging; I might be able to contribute something original.

Olive Schreiner was catapulted to fame with the publication of her novel *The Story of an African Farm* in 1883, which she had written as a young adult in circumstances not dissimilar to those of Miles Franklin when she wrote *My Brilliant Career*. They had both been sent out as governesses to poor farms because their own families were even poorer. Schreiner was born twenty-three years before Franklin and the latter was a great admirer of Schreiner's work (Roe 2008). *African Farm* is not a 'yarn' in the mould of *My Brilliant Career*, nor is it a Rider Haggard African adventure story, as one commentator at the time thought. On the contrary, Olive Schreiner's novel about sexuality and death challenged conventional understandings of gender roles, religion, and colonialism: the antisocial impulses of her characters, Lyndall and Waldo, leading eventually to their demise. The novel was received in England and elsewhere to great acclaim and Schreiner, in London, found herself being courted by intellectuals and writers of the period such as Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, Karl Pearson, Amy Levy, and Eleanor Marx (First 1989). In London's debating societies, she was able to articulate theoretically what had been primitive thoughts when she penned *African Farm*. After nine years, Schreiner returned to the land of her youth, South Africa, to concentrate on her writing and to publish. Despite her declaration that she would never marry, four years later at the age of thirty-eight, she married a South African farmer, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner, a man eight years her junior¹. It was a time of flux and change in South Africa, and both were highly critical of British imperial designs on the country. Schreiner began writing politically charged allegories and polemical essays. It is these South African years, returning from the

metropolitan centre of empire to the Cape Colony a mature woman and famed novelist, that I wanted to capture in fictional form, believing it a period and a place that offered the most potential for exploring the essential woman and artist. The significance of Schreiner's marriage in this summary of her life relates to her husband's role as her first biographer, the implications of which are discussed below.

Unearthing so many biographies and published commentaries on my subject raised both methodological and theoretical questions. Should I, as Hayden White (1974, 2002) suggests of historiography, feel obliged to interpret every available text in order for a full and accurate picture to be faithfully drawn? Or, in doing so, would I be impeding the originality of my own work, as Mullan above suggests, condemning it to a secondary status? Hayden White's methodological challenge, of course, is directed at historians (biographers?) and makes sense in the context of his theoretical insights. Specifically, his notion of meta-history and the text as a site of multiple interpretations, emphases, prejudices and ideologies. Cherry Clayton's (1984) analysis of the extant Schreiner biographies is illustrative. She draws our attention to the chronological specificity of each, ranging from 'the life of a genius' to a self-sacrificing 'angel in the house' interpretation, to a knowing assessment of a 'Victorian neurotic'. Further, she argues, each of the Schreiner biographies is underpinned by its own ideology; from 'Afrikaner patriotism' to 'British jingoism' to 'Marxist feminism'.

It was Cronwright's biography of his wife (1924) that I first read and, in flicking through subsequent Schreiner biographies and scholarship, uncovered a fury against the man²; condemned for what many perceive as his misrepresentations of her, employing in his narrative such labels as an 'undisciplined genius', and in reference to her mathematical ability as 'outside the scope of her splendid intellect'³. I returned to the original biography and found it peppered with such backhanders but, as Ruth Parkin-Gounelas (1991) points out, as Schreiner's husband and first biographer, Cronwright was an easy target⁴.

I next read Samuel Cronwright's companion volume of his wife's letters (1924). Here, too, he has been heavily criticised for his selective editing of the letters in his possession, for redacting parts that included the names of third parties, and for destroying many letters he considered to be 'nothing of interest' (Stanley 2009). Olive Schreiner never wrote an autobiography but she was a habitual correspondent, producing over her lifetime some six or seven thousand letters. Remarkably, and despite her husband's ill-considered actions, five thousand have survived and are published in several edited collections. After her return to South Africa, Schreiner's letter writing was essential to her keeping her attachments to her London life (including her publishers and publicists), for reaffirming old friendships in South Africa and for consolidating new ones. She

used her letters as an outlet for all her superfluous feelings and they give an intimate glimpse of the woman and the artist: her shifting selves, her moods, her thoughts about fellow South Africans, about the Cape Colony's politics, about matters of gender and race, and about her writing. But her letters are more than this. They are a part of a 'large, complex and interrelated system of writing and receiving' (Stanley 2011). For those living in towns and cities, the rapidity of postal collections and deliveries facilitated a regular flow of contact, exchange, and chatter.

These epistolary exchanges inscribe references to people and events, some of which have remained unexplored. Veiled sentences in the letters, and redacted names in the Cronwright collection, led me to search for those shadowy third parties. Often, they were found in autobiographies or the collected letters of her contemporaries or autobiographies or, indeed, biographies of these other 'dramatis personae'. Once found, they added a richness of detail and offered the potential for imagining, for the telling of stories yet untold, about Schreiner's intimate life. The Schreiner biographies then, with the exception of her husband's biography, have become a second order to my fictionalised narrative, with the epistolary offering me a more fruitful and original way forward. Elusive facts found in disparate places, when knitted together imaginatively can, I hope, nourish my own creative practice in capturing a life on the page. That said, the chronological and temporal facts of Olive Schreiner's life have provided an essential framework. They are the historical foil; Galgut's 'bones', and Toibin's 'anchor'. To quote Toibin '... the more I stick within the framework of the facts, the more I get from that, the more I feel that this is real and I have to make it more real, I have to make it seem to matter. You're anchored ...' (2018).

I return to the literary critic John Mullan's dilemma for biographical fiction, namely, between trust and status. On the evidence of my own early research and writing, I'm inclined to think that Mullan's is a false dichotomy. The more important question being: are we trying to resemble biography in fictional form, or are we writing literary fiction? In researching for my novel about Olive Schreiner, I hope that I have tipped the balance in the direction of the latter. Biographies about the subject have their place in the novelist's arsenal, but they need to be kept at arms-length to allow the creative spirit of the writer to come to the fore. For me at least, it is the primary materials and the epistolary in particular, that have been the most valuable resource for inspiring and directing attention. But even here, it is only the imagination of the writer that can read between the lines, fill the gaps, and perhaps capture something unique that sets both the work and knowledge about the subject, and her art, apart. I give Hayden White the last word: 'It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same' (2002: 98).

Endnotes

1. At her request, Samuel Cronwright took his wife's name on their marriage.
2. Olive Schreiner did not want a biography written about her, but if one were to be written she said that it must be written by either her friend, Havelock Ellis, or her husband. Its publication followed her death in 1920.
3. Olive Schreiner regarded her feminist treatise *Woman and Labour* (1911) as her 'scientific' book, and another of her non-fiction books, *Thoughts on South Africa* (1923) is one of the best early examples of ethnography.
4. A resonance here with Janet Malcolm's book (1994) on the Silvia Plath biographies.

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