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WRIT101: Ethics of Representation for Creative Writers

Shady E. Cosgrove
University of Wollongong, shady@uow.edu.au

WRIT101

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"Why do I have to research the setting for this story? It's fiction, after all. It should be obvious I'm making it up."
— A writing student whose story was set in the early 1940s United States. During his workshop, he asked if Hitler was involved with World War II.

Medicine, journalism, law: these are courses that require students to take classes in ethics. They are compulsory subjects in areas where, upon graduation, students are trained to work with "real" human subjects. It may sound outlandish, but what about creative writing: should creative writers be expected to study the ethical implications of their craft? Certainly many teachers incorporate dialogue about representation into class discussions, but I would argue that prose fiction writers in the academy have escaped scrutiny in the ethics debate because the subjects under analysis — characters — are not real. I will argue here that the effects of these characters (and indeed other aspects of narrative) can be quite real to readers and, due to literary history's privileging of realism, it is imperative to the craft that students consider an ethics of representation. In an attempt to tease out this issue, I will discuss notions of truth in fiction, the role of creative writing within the higher education context, and, finally, practical strategies teachers can use to bring discussions of representation into the prose fiction classroom. I subscribe to the Collins Australian dictionary definition of *ethics* as "the philosophical study of the moral value of human conduct and of the rules and principles that ought to govern it"; however, this is not an essay on ethics per se, but rather on how discussions of representation and practice can be incorporated into the classroom. I take the literary academic Jane Donahue Eberwein (1981: 606) as a starting point when she says, "Great books allow us to confront the problem of failure, the anxieties evoked by change, the ambiguity of moral choices." I wonder: if creative writing programs are training students with the hope some of them may write "great books" that allow such confrontation, how do we as writers and academics ensure they can thoughtfully negotiate issues of representation?

Truth in Fiction

The first questions I pose are: In fiction, how "true" must the narrative be? For those writing about other historical periods or representing othered groups, how much research constitutes "enough," and indeed, can any amount fill this amorphous quota? It's easy to say "truth" is conceptually out of vogue, that Roland Barthes's author is dead, and the text is now about reader response, but if "narratives in prose and film infamously manipulate our feelings and call upon our built-in capacity to feel with others" (Keen 2006: 209), then as writers and teachers, we need to ensure our students consider issues of representation. While I support multiple perspectives and notions of subjectivity, the student who writes about concentration camps without researching them runs the risk of propagating historical inaccuracies. Representation is an issue inherent to narrative technique, involving strategies from tone to character to point of view, and these can have ideological implications.

Certainly notions of truth are drawn to the fore in nonfiction and autobiography. Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta* highlighted reader/critic expectations for "truth" in autobiography because she recounted stories in her autobiography that, while true, had not necessarily happened to her (Eakin 2001). Part of the outcry rested in the perception that she had violated Phillippe Lejeune's (1989) "autobiographical pact," but it was more than a matter of genre. As autobiography theorist Paul John Eakin (2001: 114) observed: "You don't make the front page of the *New York Times* as Menchú did for violating a literary convention." Part of the fury may have rested in the fact that readers and critics were drawn into the world Menchú described. After all, as reviewer Pamela Schaff (2001: 234) posits, "Writing allows one to enter another's world, to stand in another's shoes, and the potential for self-transcendent empathy and understanding is obvious." Interestingly, courses in creative nonfiction tend to include more discussion on matters of ethics and representation than those in fiction. For example, the writing program at Columbia University offers nonfiction subjects such as "Can Truth Be Told? Ethics in Non-fiction Story Telling" and "Investigations: The Craft of Non-fiction Research" without equivalent subjects in prose fiction. Part of this, I would argue, stems from the fact that "real" human subjects are involved in the interviewing and writing process. That is, concerns about ethics tend to focus on the process of representation (that is, who is being written about) rather than the reader who later engages with the representation. For life historians Pat Sikes and Ivor Goodson (2001: 90), the "key ethical consideration is how the research affects the people whose experiences, perceptions, behav-

iours, attitudes, or whatever, are the focus of the study." Fiction writers have a different concern: presumably the fiction has evolved from imagination and life experience, two things that cannot be put to university administration for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. However, it's the representations that are created, the way the "data" have been written up that can affect readers. I argue here that a responsible creative writing pedagogy would operate on the basis that through their writing, "students need to understand that they are, in essence, inventing a discourse; they must link their created discourse community with the academic conventions that govern other disciplines" (Spear 1997: 330).

However, the relevance of research and representation as issues that affect creative writing is not an external imposition from university structures. They are central to the craft of writing. If a lazy author misrepresents historical details, one would hope that editors and publishers would be reticent to continue with the work or that, if published, such negligence would be outed by readers and critics. This sense of political/historical/social "accuracy" translates emotionally. As narratologist Suzanne Keen (2006: 215) notes: "Experiences of empathic inaccuracy may contribute to a reader's outraged sense that the author's perspective is simply wrong." Keen's comment supports Michael Riffaterre's work (1990: 2) on verisimilitude and his argument that a realist narrative needs "a compellingly visible coherence in the sequence of causes and effects" in order to function. This "semblance of veracity," as Seymour Chatman (1978: 227) terms it, operates on a plotted level as well as an emotional level. If there is not consistency within the text, the reader can rightly question whether the author is fulfilling genre convention.

But how seriously should we take ideas of "truth" and realism in fiction when fiction draws attention to itself as being just that? After all, the genre frequently lends itself to narrative intrusion. The fact remains that "all literary genres are artifacts, but none more blatantly so than fiction. Its very name declares its artificiality, and yet it must somehow be true to hold the interest of its readers, to tell them about experiences at once imaginary and relevant to their own lives" (Riffaterre 1990: xii). It is this deeper "truth" that is so poignant for readers. But I would say, too, that in keeping with the realist tradition, the reader also assumes setting details (temporal or place) to be researched and accurate. The specifics may be imaginary; however, they must adhere to the realist limits as established by the author: while the bedroom descriptions may not detail a "real" room, if the narrative is set during World War II, the room would not have Internet access unless the author had signaled to the reader that the story was not following the conventions of realism.

Creative Writing Programs

Obviously it's worrying that students would undervalue the importance of research in creative writing. Part of this stems from the fact that outsiders often view creative writing as an inspirational, one-draft exercise in capturing the creative muse. When students are forced to workshop and rewrite their work, a staple of creative writing pedagogy, it becomes more difficult to overlook the roles of determination and perseverance in creative writing. But students aren't the only ones who misunderstand the discipline: this myth is often perpetuated within the university context. As George Kalamaras (1999: 78) states: "Specifically, many administrators [and] faculty . . . see *'creative writing'* as just that—some special 'creative' activity quite different from the business of the academy." While some might view this perspective as liberating, it feeds the illusion that writing is mere muse without rigorous theoretical and academic input. Others, like writer and academic Shirley Lim (2003: 155), argue that creative writing has actually enjoyed a position of privilege: "While creative writing programs have burgeoned all over the United States, they have seldom received the scrutiny of outsiders or been required to account for themselves to the same extent as programs like composition and American studies." This raises the question: has creative writing undergone enough scrutiny? If Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) executive director D. W. Fenza is correct in asserting that the purpose of postgraduate study in creative writing is to become an accomplished writer "who makes significant contributions to contemporary literature" (Lim 2003: 162), then it seems imperative that creative writing programs address issues of representation.

Pedagogy: How to Address Issues of Research and Representation in the Classroom

If my argument above is taken to its end—that is, if considering an ethics of representation is critical to the craft of writing—then it follows that any student studying writing would already be aware of these issues. However, teachers can focus on the particulars of narrative craft without drawing student attention to the social implications of a story. So how do creative writing administrations ensure students consider issues of ethics, research, and representation? Do they make ethics of representation a required subject for majors? I'm wary of that prospect because it sequesters these considerations away from the "real" classes of writing. This debate is hardly new—women's studies departments have been considering the integration/autonomy debate for more than three decades. Perhaps the most viable option is to incorporate this debate directly into creative writing classes via a critical pedagogy.

Rochelle Harris (2004: 402) explains: "A writing teacher following the tenets of critical pedagogy would not just help the student find a transition sentence for the second paragraph or a public audience for that text; this teacher would ask that student what is at stake in that paragraph and offer the student readings that have different cultural, political, or social paradigms to help the student resee his or her own text." Obviously, many teachers do this. Such a pedagogy involves immense dexterity on their parts — not only must one negotiate the classroom dynamics, but she must also focus on critically engaging with the work and with its ideas in light of cultural, political, and social paradigms. While it can be a spontaneous negotiation, this kind of multilayered class is key to Kalamaras's (1999: 81) vision of creative writing: "A creative writing course which blurs the boundaries of discourses and foregrounds 'social responsibility' would allow for multiple kinds of writing (and reading and talking) rather than relying only upon those language activities that merely aim for 'finished' student poems or stories." That is, teachers would focus on student work not solely as a final "product," but also as a platform to focus on social responsibility that would emphasize ideas of process and representation. The way class discussion is handled throughout the workshop process is a critical aspect to the success of the class, and discussion can be tricky to negotiate because of its improvisational aspects.

So what are concrete strategies teachers can use in the classroom to facilitate this multilayered approach? I posit three strategies for highlighting issues of representation for students (that can be used in creative writing subjects across various genres) — using the workshop, the readings, and the assessment tasks. First, the teacher can use the existing workshop infrastructure. The creative writing workshop is already an environment where critical engagement is mandatory. Students workshop each others' pieces, offering feedback to the author on ways the text can be improved. Because the aim is that this feedback be specific and well evidenced, both readers and writers are forced to engage critically with the text, providing opportunity to reflect on representation. As Harris (2004: 416) posits, "Students' texts can be heteroglossic counternarratives to combat hegemony; they can be ways to develop students' critical consciousness, tools for the study of language, articulations of self and situatedness, and attempts at naming and transforming the world." Teachers can take advantage of this critical engagement and discussion to ensure that students contemplate the narrative choices they have made and the ensuing representational implications. Obviously no one can be aware of all the implications or effects of a work at all times, but the classroom can provide a site where students face into what it means to represent something.

"But that's not what I meant . . . " is a phrase I frequently hear from students. The workshop provides a place for students to test writing against intent.

In fact, student work can often address many issues of representation at once. For instance, in one of my prose subjects, a young man wrote a story in which three vampire women retaliated against a sexist shopkeeper by luring him to their car and eating him. The prose was punchy; the line-by-line writing, free of cliché; the structure and suspense, impeccable. However, the shopkeeper was emphatically Lebanese, and the story sparked class debate over how the Australian Lebanese population was represented — despite the fact that other facets of the narrative were clearly outside the realist mode. Students agreed the story was well written, but female students especially were wary of how stereotype had influenced the characterization of the shopkeeper. This surprised the author, as he felt the text was addressing issues that would have sparked their sympathy. This was an obvious example where students were eager to discuss issues of representation with no prodding from me. However, the workshop model doesn't *necessarily* act as a site to discuss issues of representation. Just as students were eager in this instance, I've had other classes that focused on line-by-line details and missed obvious issues beyond the text or were unsure how to proceed in such a discussion. Indeed, students were so shocked when one young man (mentioned at the start of this essay) didn't know Hitler was involved with World War II that the usually talkative class fell absolutely silent.

Critical reflection on methods of representation can also take place during class discussions on teacher-chosen texts. In the classroom, Kalamaras (1999: 80) attempts "to blur the boundaries of discourses in order to bring 'social responsibility' into a discussion from which it would otherwise be omitted." He provides the example of a class discussion about Heather McHugh's poem "I Knew I'd Sing." After reading the poem aloud and discussing the technical aspects of the poem, the class concentrated on its content (female affirmation) and the appropriateness of McHugh's language. They also focused on how the gender of the class readers (both women) affected interpretations of the poem. In this way, Kalamaras used the text to address technical strategies as issues of "social responsibility." This demands particular care by the teacher in preparing for the class because it involves a two-pronged approach in choosing class readings: not only must they demonstrate narrative techniques related to the subject to advance students as writers, they must also provide a platform into larger matters of representation.

Class discussion on writing strategies can also incite dialogue on issues of representation. Keen (2006: 213) directly links literary technique

with empathy when she writes: "Narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques — such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional states — as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers' minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism." The use of point of view and interior representation are two narrative techniques that directly address issues of perspective. In this way, they can act as catalysts for class discussion on representation. Theoretical material can also trigger debate in this arena. As discussed earlier, Chatman and Riffaterre directly address notions of truth in realist fiction and the role of verisimilitude. The vast amount of material on reader response theory and the death of the author could certainly be utilized to provoke discussion.

In another example that brings ideas of responsibility and representation into the classroom, Sandra Young organized her students to write biographies of war veterans in a life-writing class. As mentioned earlier, nonfiction has long inspired ethical consideration because of its engagement with the real, and it can offer strategies for teachers of fiction. Young (2003: 78) used the class content to emphasize "that language use constitute[s] an ethically charged act calling for responsible choices and that misusing language had implications and consequences" — something relevant across both fiction and nonfiction. By preparing and encouraging students to interview "real-life" subjects for their biography projects, she ensured "[students] understood the importance of knowing about the historical events that had been current events to their subjects" in a way that was immediate and practical, driving home the point that, in Rita Charon's words (2005: 266), "Acts of representation . . . *develop* that which is seen into something created anew." That is, through constructing the story, the story shifts. In addition to the writing assignment, students also wrote ten e-mail journals that chronicled their process. While I'm wary of journals due at the end of semester because a proportion of students inevitably write multiple entries the night before they're due, I think Charon's idea of an e-mail journal due throughout the class duration could function well within a prose fiction context.

It is not my goal that creative writing faculties all implement new subjects in "creative writing and the ethics of representation." However, I think it's important that those teaching prose fiction consider how the creative writing classroom can operate as a site for a critical pedagogy. Or, as John Bean (2007: 282) puts it, "Associate writing more effectively with disciplinary ways of thinking rather than with meeting outcome goals."

Note

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