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Dumpster Diving: A Family Excursion

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Dumpster diving: a family excursion
(the researching parent/parenting researcher)

Biographical note:
Shady Cosgrove is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Her books include What the Ground Can’t Hold (Picador 2013) and She Played Elvis (Allen and Unwin 2009). Her shorter works have appeared in Southerly, Overland, Antipodes and Best Australian Stories.

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We’ve just arrived in Brooklyn. It’s late and slick clouds threaten rain. The 3-line isn’t running from Franklin Avenue – there’s track work on – and a herd of buses have already groaned past, jam-packed with passengers. The drivers stare straight ahead, pretending they don’t see all the waving arms. Someone throws a rock at the back of one and it bounces to the ground.

A large woman in a bright dress ambles past, stepping down onto the street to move around the crowd. ‘Wouldn’t be treating us like this in a white neighbourhood, that’s for sure.’

Hostility vibrates in the air. We’re standing on a wide sidewalk but at least two hundred people are waiting and a fight’s breaking out. Only six or seven are game, but it’s enough for a wide circle to open up. Maybe someone’s pushed ahead, I don’t know. The shouting is fierce, voices match up against each other. It’s dark now and the streetlights are meek.

I’m travelling with my partner Scott and our four-year-old son Seattle. My heart is pounding and I feel like an idiot: no idea where I’m going, pulling a trundle-bag that belongs at an airport.

Finally, a bus pulls up, doors sigh open, and we’re swept on board before I can figure out if we’re heading the right way. I’m wedged up against a silver rail that reaches from ceiling to floor, one arm hooked around the pole, opposite hand clutching Seattle’s shoulder. Scott has been shoved up the back. We make eye-contact and then he disappears into the throng.

Seattle pulls my arm. ‘Mama, I’m hungry.’

‘I know, mate. We’ll be there soon.’

An older woman, sitting on the opposite side of the bus rubs her hip. She smiles, eyebrows lift with a ‘we’re-all-in-this-together’ shrug, and I’m grateful for the kindness of eye contact.

‘This stop at Kingston Avenue?’ I ask through the bodies between us.

She nods.

Someone’s yelling outside. More jostling. Now the driver’s calling the cops.

We’re staying with a friend in Crown Heights, a neighbourhood in the middle of Brooklyn, known for race riots in the early 1990s. The majority of the population is West Indian and African-American but there’s a large minority of Hasidic Jews as well. Hasidic Jews are ultra-orthodox. The men wear black suits, long beards and brimmed hats while the women wear modest skirts and wigs (even with the wigs, sometimes they shave their heads beneath, depending on the community).

Eastern Parkway, a tree-lined thoroughfare with a lovely wide sidewalk, seems to be the dividing line between the white Jewish neighbourhood and the black Caribbean one. We’re staying about two blocks into the Caribbean side because gentrification is bringing white non-Hasidic folks to the area, something I have mixed feelings about.
I’ve travelled to Brooklyn because I’m researching a novel I want to write about dumpster diving, squatting and alternatives to capitalism. New York is a global hub for this stuff – especially for freegans. Freegans are people who question the role of money in their lives and try to live without it – scavenging and bartering whenever possible. They’ve attracted media attention because they offer dumpster diving tours, and they’re people who choose to live without money – many of the long-term freegans I met had been unhappily employed (teachers, office workers, etcetera) before giving up money. In the next few weeks, I’ll go dumpster diving along Wall Street with the New York freegan chapter. I’ll also tour squats and community gardens in Alphabet City with the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space. I’ll learn foraging techniques in Central Park – how to spot edible stuff that grows in the wild, everything from yellow wood sorrel to cattail leaves. I’ll ride a bike through Manhattan with bicycle activists. I’ll check out sustainable rooftop farms and volunteer at the Really, Really Free Market (where everything really is for free). I’ll visit the Fixers’ Collective, a group of tradesmen who fix lamps and pots and suitcases (anything that anyone brings in) because they’re committed to keeping stuff out of landfill. And all of this – even the midnight dumpster diving excursions – I’m doing with my family.

I’m interested in how writers research their material, and it seems to be a gendered issue. That is, if women are committed novelists who need experiential research to write novels, and they have young children who need to come with them: what issues does this raise? I take on board that I’m writing from a privileged position – I work in a university context and was awarded study leave. Yet, even with this support, I couldn’t find one writing residency in Australia, the United States or Europe that catered for a parent with a small child, even though I had another responsible adult available for full-time childcare. On one hand, I understand: other writers want tranquillity and space to write, and that’s not something usually associated with small children. But the message then becomes: women can be mothers or they can be writers but it’s too much to expect you can be both. And even more problematic is how I came to internalise this – sometimes cutting myself off from research opportunities because I was worried about the reception of my child, like parenthood was something to be ashamed of.

Back at the bus stop, the fight dissipates and the crowded bus pulls onto the thoroughfare. And though it doesn’t stop at Kingston Ave as promised, we’re able to walk back along Eastern Parkway and arrive safely at my friend’s apartment where we’re renting a room. It’s now getting close to midnight.

The next morning I check out the street where we’re staying. Directly opposite, there’s a Laundromat and next to that, a community centre. It’s not until I’m walking around the neighbourhood that I notice the handwritten sign in the window: Congratulations, Crown Heights. 37 days since the last shooting! The ‘7’ is a new addition: it’s changed daily.
Maybe I’ve spent too much time in Australia, listening to news reports that paint the United States as a violent nation, out of control with its gun use, but I’m alarmed. ‘Have I brought our child into a war zone?’ I ask Scott.

He shrugs, big shoulders that used to play prop. ‘We’ll be fine.’

I wasn’t worried about me or my partner: I was worried about my child, and felt guilty about what I might be exposing him to. The assumption was that my research was jeopardizing my child’s safety. And too, there was an uncomfortable awareness that we had the luxury of being able to leave, which kicks at a deeper issue for me: how can anyone write when there’s so much political and social work that needs to be done? Yes, writing can be action, and creative work matters – of course it does – but sometimes I’m overwhelmed by the class implications of Virginia Woolf’s ‘room of one’s own’ and the privilege of being able to travel for research.

Travel is critical to primary research if the creative work is set in a place unknown to the writer, and the issue with travel and parenting is that travel involves risk: you may well be going to places you’ve never been and part of that experience is grappling with the unexpected. In my experience it takes time to understand a place enough to convincingly set ninety thousand words there. Obviously this varies depending on the novelist and the project, but I would have been hard-pressed to accomplish my research in less than the six weeks we spent in New York. Ideally I would have stayed longer, with time to draft, but that wasn’t in budget.

As my project has emerged, it’s turned out that travelling with my family actually provided important experiential data. The novel is now fully drafted (although by no means complete – I’ve sunk into the rewriting process now) and I know the protagonist is a single mother travelling with her son from Sydney to Brooklyn. Whether these character choices would have transpired if I’d been travelling in different circumstances, it’s hard to surmise. However it’s turned out that travelling with family was not an added pressure to the business of research: it was the research. I wasn’t a single parent by any means but much of the detail in the manuscript about the main parent-child relationship was observed through direct experience – for example, moving with a child through a crowded subway station, the power of a Lego caravan to keep a child occupied, the knock-knock jokes with no punch line, etc. Of course the novel is not about my child and I am not the protagonist, but many details have been gleaned from lived experience.

Sometimes too researching with my child provided interesting ways to connect with the research material. Before our first trip to dumpster dive with the folks from freegan.info, we attended a meeting at the Atrium, 60 Wall Street. It’s a privately owned public space: a vast room with a wall of windows to the street outside, white-marbled columns that jut upwards and tall palm trees growing inside. Eight or nine of us sat around a table with snacks (dumpstered goldfish crackers and gourmet chocolates).

To understated it, I was apprehensive about turning up with Seattle. I thought his presence would alienate me from the group (after all, who brings their child dumpster
diving?). I’d considered going alone, but after the bus stop incident I was wary of travelling back to Crown Heights late at night, as dumpster diving tours frequently go well past midnight. The worry here – about how my child would be received – was very real. If I’d been a single parent, without a two-to-one parenting ratio, I would not have brought my child – and this, interestingly, would have meant a much less meaningful research experience.

The meeting ran with a focus on equality – the folks ranged in age from early twenties to early fifties. The person leading proceedings, Janet, was a woman in her late forties or early fifties with piercing blue eyes. She told one of the attendees to keep a watch on her ‘so I don’t talk too much’ and she was serious, not because she was an over-talker but because freegans aim for equality in process, and speaking-time matters. We introduced ourselves, and everyone was given the same amount of time to speak, including my son. There was also a person nominated to watch over the vibe and interrupt if things got heated, though in my experiences with this crew (that night and over the next few weeks) I saw little evidence this was needed. While it may be unconventional to take your child dumpster diving – we didn’t get home until well past one in the morning – I was excited he could see decentralised decision-making in action. And surprisingly (for me) it seemed the group got a kick out of having a kid there.

More people turned up when the meeting was finished so there were about twenty of us. Some were new to dumpster diving – college students from NYU doing it for a non-fiction class assessment – and others were travellers, looking to lighten the burden on their budgets. The older folks seemed to be the regulars, and there was a mix of ethnicities. I was surprised by this diversity. The ethnographic research I’d come across said that dumpster divers are usually white young men. As I said before, many of the people I came across seemed to be diving out of choice – these were folks who’d made a conscious decision to live with less ‘stuff’ and more time in their lives. Some of them were probably doing so out of necessity but there didn’t seem to be friction within the group about individual motivations.

We were given a run-down of the rules:

- Leave any dumpster site cleaner than you find it.
- Don’t block the sidewalk (while going through garbage isn’t illegal because it’s deemed to be in the public domain, blocking the sidewalk can get you in trouble with the police).
- Everything is shared – take what you need but offer your finds to the group (something in keeping with my experiences dumpster diving in Australia) and don’t take anything you won’t use (someone else may try diving at the same spot later in the night).
- It’s important to thoroughly clean anything you find before you eat it – soak it in vinegar, etc. This means there’s no eating on site.

I’m surprised Janet would have to articulate this but before the night was finished one young man had a chicken schnitzel dangling from his fingers and started gnawing into it, right on the sidewalk.
When we kicked off on the trash tour, it was about nine-thirty at night. Seattle was wide-eyed, up on Scott’s shoulders. We were moving as part of a herd, wandering up and down Wall Street and back alleys, stopping in front of any shop with a big mound of plastic bags in front. I brought gloves and got straight into it, untangling knots, often sifting through bags of employee garbage – plastic bags, empty soda bottles, candy wrappers – without any luck. In New York City, dumpster diving is a misnomer: usually it’s just going through bags of garbage lined up on the street.

Then, in front of a bakery, there was a flurry over three bags: ‘Here we’ve got bread rolls. Lots of bread rolls.’ Janet was holding a bagel over her head and people flocked in, popping the sesame and multigrain rolls into carry bags.

Another voice from an adjacent pile: ‘Yoghurt. Individual tubs – strawberry and mango. Barcodes have been cut out but they don’t expire until tomorrow.’ Another push. This was the kind of detail I couldn’t have imagined – who knew that employees would spend time cutting bar codes out of yoghurt tubs to make them less attractive to dumpster divers? And the general detail of what kinds of foods were thrown away was important as well: even though I’d been dumpster diving back in Australia, dumpster hauls depend entirely on the shops that populate a street.

The biggest scores were from bakeries and supermarkets, but there were often sandwiches in front of the chemist-cum-quick mart Duane Reade and coffee shop Starbucks. I found a bunch of sandwiches from another coffee shop that were still cold but I was hesitant about dumped meat so I offered them back to the group and they were snatched up.

The details of travelling with a small child aren’t the only ones that have proved important to the novel. In the second chapter, a group of characters go dumpster diving and I’ve included the physical detail of yoghurt pots with cut-out barcodes, the mass of bread rolls and bagels, Starbucks sandwiches, and supermarket produce (especially the inflated bags of lettuce – too much air is a sign they’re probably off). As well, I was inspired by the freegans’ decentralised decision-making. As the book is exploring different ways of social organisation and interaction, this example gave me ideas about how characters might interact, even though they aren’t in any way connected to the people I met. These are only a few examples of how research has underpinned my creative project – there were hundreds of details and inspirations gleaned while researching that impacted the book. One of the things I love about this creative writing practice is that it demands flexibility – the writer’s project will necessarily change because of the research he/she undertakes. The research isn’t separate to the creative practice – it is part of it.

And through all of the late night dumpster diving, Seattle was cheering us on, a spontaneous mascot. In retrospect, I wonder if Seattle’s presence contributed to the warm environment. Perhaps people were friendly and accommodating because there was an enthusiastic kid perched on his father’s shoulders, pointing to garbage bags and yelling out: ‘Look in that one, Mum. Look there!’

The worry with experiential research and parenting is that it can take the researcher to dangerous places. If you’re writing about squats, they don’t spring up in affluent, thriving neighbourhoods. Parts of the South Bronx and East New York weren’t places
I’d feel comfortable visiting at night with or without my child, and each researcher has to strike their own balance between research and personal safety. I take on board this account could well be making a different argument if something horrific had happened during our travels. But still, I think it was important to face into the discomfort of being a researching parent/parenting researcher and attend that freegan meeting with Scott and Seattle in tow – because I’d been policing myself, worried without reason my child wouldn’t be welcome, and enforcing a writer-mother duality that wasn’t necessary. And while it may be true that as a larger culture we need to re-think the opportunities afforded to writer-parents, it’s also true that as a writer I need to make sure I don’t alienate myself unnecessarily.
**Research statement**

**Research background**
Research is a key component of creative writing, but there are few substantial explorations of how that research occurs, and even fewer that address parenthood within this context. This creative non-fiction account describes the author’s experiences in researching a realist, contemporary novel, and how that was influenced by the presence of her child.

**Research contribution**
This piece offers a creative non-fiction case study that explores the kinds of research an author might undertake, and how having a child can both present opportunities and challenges to this research process. Because research is usually masked when presenting a unified fictional text, this is particularly relevant for those interested in the craft of fiction. The author also argues that, as a researcher and writer, she needs to question her own drive to compartmentalise research and parenthood.

**Research significance**
This piece unpacks how the writer accesses detail that is critical to ‘showing’ in a creative work and discusses the politics of doing this with small children. By showing how ‘showing’ works, the author demonstrates the collective layering essential to fiction, offering a map to other writers. In addition, by addressing the question of how mothers of small children can undertake research, she avoids the binary of mother and writer, while also interrogating her own compliance to this hegemonic division.