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Getting my hands dirty: research and writing

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Abstract

Biographical note:

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Shady Cosgrove

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<<http://www.shadycosgrove.blogspot.com.au>>

Keywords:

Creative writing – non-fiction – life writing – non-ficto-critical

9.15pm on a Sunday: I'm parked on the street, in front of Aldi Wollongong. The lot is empty, the sky threatening rain. I've been waiting for fifteen minutes, scanning my phone, peering up the street. Inside the supermarket, the fluorescent lights are dimmed and I imagine ghosts patrolling the aisles, trolleys moving with slow deliberation. A siren sounds nearby, and I jump in my seat, scanning the rear view mirror. Just a fire engine.

Finally, a car pulls in. Then another. My heart is thumping, my hands clammy. I turn the ignition and follow them. We circle round to the dumpsters on the far side of the lot and I park next to the Toyota, one space between us. I unroll my window.

'Anne?' I ask.

A woman with brown hair says, 'Nah, but she told us you were coming. Hope it's good – haven't had much luck lately.'

Her friend in the passenger seat nods.

I get out and introduce myself. They're friendly, early twenties. I make small talk about my kid and realise I'm signposting my age. I try to think of something else – anything else – but everything keeps coming back to my four-year-old and how excited he is that I'm dumpster diving. He's hoping Aldi have had a toy cull.

After a moment Anne pulls in. She's younger than I expected from her text messages: probably early twenties too. She's a friend of a friend of a friend – I put a call out on Facebook and her details were passed on to me. The women from the other car join us, and more introductions go down. There are about six of us now. Some are wearing scrubby flannel shirts, a couple are dressed in black. One of them has a headlamp.

'Is it always women?' I ask.

'Heaps easier with security guards. Better for getting into dumpsters, too.'

I'm surprised. This flies in the face of all the ethnographic research from Europe and the States that says dumpster diving is male-dominated, and I'm struck with love for the tough Aussie woman who's not afraid to climb into a garbage bin.

'How long you been doing it?'

Some, like Anne, have been going for a few years, others a few months. While we're talking, the woman with the headlamp stakes out the dumpsters with her friend. She comes back, shrugging.

'Nothing but rancid meat,' she says.

Anne asks if it's fit for her dog but the women don't think so. And then we're talking about where to hit next, and I'm reminded of Saturday nights in the small town where I grew up – teenagers meeting in the bank parking lot, cruising for parties. There's that same fear, too: of cops, store managers, security guards.

But to be clear: we're going through stuff that's been thrown away, stuff deemed to be in the public domain. The women tell me you never tamper with locks and only access places on the periphery of parking lots because you don't want to inadvertently

trespass. And there are rules to dumpstering – never make a mess, never take more than you need, and never stay if you're asked to leave.

We decide to hit Fairy Meadow Aldi, and drive en convoy along Corrimal Street. This time the bins are in a metal container so two of us have to shimmy underneath a grate on our bellies and stand up inside the dumpster hull. Inside, we take turns holding the bin open while the other looks through the garbage with a torch. I'm holding my breath but the stench isn't too bad. Even so, there's not much glory. Just big plastic bags full of store garbage and a bunch of flowers, which I pass out through an opening in the top.

The women are bummed.

'You wouldn't believe the stuff I've found.'

Anne has her phone out, scrolling through photos. She tilts the screen and shows me elaborate food portraits: fresh, stacked produce; biscuits and bread; cartons of beer.

'Beer?' I ask.

'Amazing what gets thrown away.'

The woman from the Toyota nods, 'Once we even found a coffee machine, you know one of those capsule ones. The box had been damaged so it was thrown away.'

Another woman who, it turns out, lives in a share house on my street, adds, 'Usually you get a heap of one thing. Like forty punnets of blueberries. And they have to be eaten straight away so you take them home, wash them, and pack them in the freezer or make jam that night. Sometimes you're up until three or four in the morning.'

They talk too about the politics of consumption, about how modern living is just not sustainable and if they can take just a little bit out of landfill then that's gotta be a good thing. And I'm struck with how down-to-earth and unpretentious these women are.

After the disappointment of Aldi, half of the crew head home and just three of us carry on to Woolies. There, the bins get locked away at night so you need to arrive before closing, they tell me.

We move through the parking lot, all stealth and focus, down a ramp to the loading bay. At the bins, I think we've hit a gold mine: five or six big bags say 'bread mix' but they're empty, stuffed with cardboard and paper. We keep rifling through the store garbage and I find a plastic bag with five beautifully ripe tomatoes. My new friend with the headlamp unearths a bag of broccolini – at least a kilo, maybe more. The produce couldn't be in better condition. It's perfectly ripe, and this worries me.

'Why's it being thrown out?' I whisper.

'Sometimes they just don't have room on the shelves. It's crazy,' my neighbour says.

Since it's my first dive, they tell me to keep the loot and I'm impressed with the generosity. It's not a huge haul but it is disturbing that such stunning food has been thrown away.

I give my neighbour a ride home. I'm so giddy I keep misplacing things – my keys, my gloves – and she laughs.

'It's easy to get hooked.'

She's right. I'm back at it on Wednesday and find grapes, capsicum and bok choi. And it's not the politics or the fact this stuff is free. It's this vigorous feeling I haven't known since my early twenties, like anything is possible and the world isn't fixed. Just because someone has called this beautiful tomato 'garbage' doesn't mean I have to agree. I get to make that choice.

I wasn't dumpster diving because I'm strapped for cash. I was reaching into bins because I'm writing a novel where a number of the characters are dumpster divers and if you want to write about something convincingly – even if it's fiction, *especially* if it's fiction – you need concrete details. My novel (in progress) is called 'Freefall'. It is set in a freegan community in New York City. Freegans are 'people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources' (Freegan Info). They take recycling to the political limit – trying to re-use anything they can to avoid adding to the bins. While my newfound friends in Wollongong seemed politically aware I don't know that any of them self-identified as freegan. I was impressed with how inclusive they were – while I'd been known to look through my neighbours' cast-aways during council clean-up, I'd never been dumpster diving before the night described above, and no one seemed to hold that against me.

My question here isn't so much about the politics of this particular project. Rather, I'm interested in how writers research and how that research affects writers. To be clear, I'm not talking about capital 'R' research – with HERDC points and ERA statements – I'm talking about the research novelists do to make sure their stories ring true. Because I think this research can transform us, both as people and as writers.

Certainly reading and writing can affect us. A great deal of work has been done on narrative empathy and reading (Gabriel and Young 2011; Mar, Oatley and Peterson 2009; Keen 2006). And it follows that fiction writing, too, can affect our ability to imagine other lives, but how novelists research – and how it impacts us – is something that hasn't received much critical attention. Though in author interviews, writers discuss their varying processes. In an interview with *Arts ATL* (2013) about his novel *Canada*, Richard Ford says he was thinking about research 'in both large and small terms'. For instance, 'Where in Great Falls does this take place? Where is the jail in Great Falls? How do you get from that place to the jail? All that kind of stuff, as well as more intellectual issues like borders and boundaries.'

For me, research – especially experiential research – offers a way to find the concrete details to hang my scenes on and it's the detail that makes these scenes seem authentic. Of course authenticity is a matter of subjective opinion and too much detail (or the wrong sort) can stifle a story's momentum, but generally if the grounding detail is convincing, I can take bigger risks with plot or character. The kinds of questions I was trying to answer in the supermarket parking lots were both logistical – How big are

the bins? Do they open from the top? Are they locked? – and thematic – What does it mean to dumpster dive? Is it viable? Why is a perfectly functioning object deemed ‘garbage’ by its position in a bin? Sometimes, however, the writer doesn’t know what questions to ask. For instance, I didn’t foresee that all of the dumpster divers I’d meet would be women or that I would need to crawl on my belly to access a bin. And to be clear, all of my research before this dive had been second hand via newspapers, word-of-mouth and scholarly articles spanning law, cultural studies, ethnography and feminism. But I’ll be spending four months in the United States this year, talking and dumpster diving with squatters and freegan activists, and I wanted to build up some experience.

As the novel I am writing is set in New York City, it is important to me to spend time there. Understanding place (as much as one can) is critical in rendering setting and the detail here is key. Ford travelled extensively in writing *Canada*:

Certainly the road, Highway 32, along which Dell travels from Partreau to Fort Royal and then from Partreau to the west, is a road that I had to go on many, many times. I never went to Creekmore, North Dakota, because there is no Creekmore, North Dakota. But I have been across the border from Weebo, Montana, into that part of North Dakota, so I know what that looks like. There is a good bit of taking my tape recorder and getting in a rental car and driving all around the places where my book takes place (2013).

It’s this kind of research that takes the author outside of their study, away from their computer, that I’m interested in here – because sometimes it pushes us into the uncomfortable. For instance, when researching her novel *State of Wonder*, Ann Patchett passed out in a hospital after witnessing a caesarean section. She also went to the Amazon, which she enjoyed for a few days, but:

Unfortunately, I stayed there for ten days. There are a lot of insects in the Amazon, a lot of mud, surprisingly few vegetables, too many snakes. You can’t go anywhere by yourself, which makes sense if you don’t know the terrain, but I enjoy going places by myself. I can see how great it would be for a very short visit, and how great it would be if you lived there and had figured out what was and wasn’t going to kill you, but the interim length of time isn’t great (Amazon).

So research can be something writers endure for the sake of their craft. And yet, research can also be a source of inspiration and excitement. Patchett’s research into opera (for her earlier novel, *Bel Canto* 2001) radically transformed her music tastes: ‘I had very little experience with opera when I wrote *Bel Canto*, and since then it’s become a huge part of my life’. Certainly, spending time reading about freeganism and dumpster diving has affected the way I view the world. I am more aware of waste and less enamoured by the aesthetic call of beautiful objects in shops. I’m also aware of the dumpster as a site of opportunity.

Research has also forced me to confront my fears in approaching strangers. I feel uncomfortable cold-calling someone like Anne (who’s name has been changed here and above) and saying ‘Hey, I’m writing a book and someone told me you know a lot about dumpster diving. Can I come with you?’ It seems a big ask to expect someone to trust me, and there’s always the issue of worthiness – who am I to claim the title

‘writer’ and be allowed access to the intimate space of story? With my last book, *What the Ground Can’t Hold (WTGCH)*, my first response to these feelings was to avoid research that took me outside my comfort zone. I thought I was being strategic in using the Andes as a setting because my sister lived there with her husband, who happened to be an avalanche expert. But as I researched the book, travelling to Argentina, there were characters and events that needed fleshing out – and I was forced to approach refugio operators, tourists, bus drivers, journalists, tango dancers and members of the group The Mothers of the Disappeared. Each conversation broadened my understanding of the story I was telling – but that wasn’t the only gift: these shared stories affected me. I was overcome with tears at the Plaza del Mayo, talking with Rosa Nair Amuedo, who’d marched around the Plaza for decades because her daughter had been kidnapped and murdered by the government during the Dirty War. Rosa’s experience was unfathomable to me – but the novelist’s job is to access the unfathomable for the reader, and this means grappling with the beauty and horror of the human condition. I write because it helps me imagine more of the world, which helps me be more compassionate, which makes me a better person. And research is the linchpin: without it, we can’t get the detail that makes the image ring true.

As well, sometimes the research can lead the writing. With *WTGCH*, I had a rough overview of the novel but research provided pivotal plot points and character arcs, even if it was accidental. For instance, there’s a scene in the novel where a young boy on a bicycle hits a pothole and dies. This was written after I witnessed a teenage girl in a similar bicycle accident in Bariloche, Argentina. All of the detail in the book is taken verbatim from that experience – and much of the book’s conflict results from the little boy’s death. And yet, this critical plot point wasn’t planned – it emerged from the ‘research’ of walking down the street. With ‘Freefall’ it’s impossible to know what will emerge from my setting research in the States. I am experimenting with a detailed outline to see if that shortens the drafting process (*WTGCH* took seven years to write) but there must be room for the research to influence the text – otherwise the research is pointless. Patchett drafts her scenes and then uses research to correct any mistakes (2011) – but I need more on-the-ground experience with this project before I start drafting scenes.

Of course, writers don’t have to experience everything they write. I am assuming most mystery writers draft murder scenes without killing anyone. And sometimes it’s not possible to visit your setting: especially if the location is in political upheaval or there’s an historical angle to the story. Secondary research can be important in determining facts but this data doesn’t always translate into the detail of lived experience. Before dumpster diving, I’d trawled through scholarly articles and newspapers but it hadn’t occurred to me that a headlamp would prove so important when sifting through a dumpster. It’s this kind of detail that matters to the story.

Some writers don’t believe in research. Their stories are directly inspired by their lives, events they’ve already experienced, and they don’t need to formalise the process by calling it ‘research’. The problem with this strategy for me is you’re then stuck writing about yourself and nothing is more boring than writing something you already think you know. I prefer Don DeLillo’s take on research, as detailed in an

interview with *The Paris Review*: ‘Anyone who enters this maze knows you have to become part scientist, novelist, biographer, historian and existential detective.’ I like that: the writer is an existential investigator, trying to illuminate the human condition. And research – whether walking down the street or scampering in a bin – is about finding detail that will impact the reader. In this search, both the text and the author are under construction.

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Research statement

Research background

While many author interviews address fiction writers and their experiences with research in passing, there are few substantial meditations on the subject. This non-fiction creative research piece ‘Getting my hands dirty: research and writing’ dissects the author’s experience of research through a non-fiction narrative and discussion piece that examines how experiential research can impact both the text and author of contemporary fiction.

Research contribution

Cosgrove’s piece investigates how research informs the creative text as well as the author. The topic is in need of exploration and Cosgrove has chosen a unique structure to do so – a non-fictional narrative, followed by a personal-critical engagement with how the described experience constitutes novelistic research and affects her as a writer. Usually research is the hidden ‘ghost’ to the novel but Cosgrove has inverted that: the ‘ghost’ here is the fictional text, which the reader doesn’t get to see.

Research significance

This piece unpacks how the writer accesses detail that is critical to ‘showing’ in a creative work. By showing how ‘showing’ works, the author demonstrates the collective layering essential to fiction, offering a map to other writers. While the first section functions as an independent creative non-fiction work, the second section reflects on how research lays the foundation for creative practice, addressing the questions: how does research happen, why is it important and how does it inform writers? These are critical questions for anyone writing contemporary fiction.