

Swinburne University of Technology

Glenice Joy Whitting

Mainstream or margin? Epistolary writing by contemporary women: The warp, the weft and the loom

Abstract:

Contemporary epistolary novels are experiments in style and form. Unlike the nineteenth-century sentimental examples, they emphasise post-modern fragmentation and the disappearance of the grand narrative. Informal, creative forms of writing, such as diaries, journals and personal letters, previously trivialised for being outside the traditional genres of canonical literature, are now accepted as legitimate, and indeed worthy of inclusion as ‘literature’. Contemporary autoethnographic epistolary creative writing can dispel cultural myths, thereby addressing social injustices and offering a powerful tool for social change. The connection between mainstream women’s writing and the epistolary form will be the focus of this paper.

Biographical note:

Glenice Whitting’s biographically based novel, *Pickle to pie*, was published by Ilura Press in 2007. Glenice is currently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Swinburne University of Technology. The creative component of her PhD is an epistolary, autoethnographic novel, ‘Hens lay, people lie’, exploring the chance meeting and thirty-five year pen friendship between an elderly American poet and a young Australian woman in an Australian/American context 1975–2005.

Keywords:

epistolary—autoethnography—autobiography—biography

Women's letters are the product of their lived experience and culture, their education and their reading and their intellect (Sadlack 2005: 16).

Epistolarity is a contentious form, one that allows its writers opportunities to examine its physical characteristics, style, content and the principles of its craft. During the last thirty years, a significant number of epistolary novels by women authors have been published (Campbell 1995: 334). These include *Miss Peabody's inheritance* (Jolley 1984), *We need to talk about Kevin* (Shriver 2003) and *The household guide to dying* (Adelaide 2008). These texts are written by women, tell women's stories and examine women's lived experience; they give women a voice and highlight neglected life experiences and cultural positions.

It can be argued that Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë used the epistolary form and published women's narratives; however, these novels were deemed to be on the margins of literature and the literary canon. The work of Austen and Brontë (and indeed epistolary nineteenth-century novels of manners generally) were considered the populist fiction of their day. Feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s challenged the masculine dominance of 'the literary canon', thus revaluing women's texts and it is now argued that the epistolary form is a respected and considered part of the literary mainstream (Gubernatis 2007: 1).

We are forever writing stories. We weave our narratives of self into texts such as letters, diaries, emails, blogs and Facebook. My autoethnographic epistolary novel, '*Hens lay, people lie*' is written in a hybrid genre, delicately balanced between auto/biography and epistolary fiction. It is both biography and autobiography, not only because it weaves my words with those of my pen friend, but also because the lives of penfriends are inextricably intertwined (Binhammer 1993: 107). Further, as Kendall once suggested in *The art of biography* (Kendall 1965: 95) that any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography within it. I therefore see autobiography as the foundation, the warp of my narrative, epistolary fiction as the woven weft and autoethnographic qualitative research as the loom. Using this metaphor, I will first explore the move from the traditional/historical marginalisation of women's auto/biographical epistolary fiction to acceptance as legitimate mainstream writing. Secondly, I will argue that autoethnography is an emerging research approach for understanding the self in a social context. Finally, I will consider the importance of the epistolary novel as a tool for social change.

A flourishing life writing culture has become one of the most dynamic and rapidly developing fields of international scholarship and generates great interest among the public. It is a conspicuous feature of the Australian literary scene and an integral part of mainstream literature (La Trobe 2009: 1). Life writing includes not just biography and autobiography, but also epistolarity. What then is an epistolary novel? It is a novel written in the form of letters, although novels, which are not composed exclusively of letters, can also be partly classified as epistolary. *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* is written in continuous prose; the only whole letter we see at once is Miss Peabody's first letter to the Australian novelist (Jolley 1984: 1-3). Diary and journal entries and more recently blogs and emails are also used. The controversial novel, *The PowerBook* by Jeanette Winterson, is an example of such form (2001).

Over the last thirty years, there has been an increase in the number of women writing contemporary auto/biographies, and epistolary fiction. This in turn has meant that the stories of women's marginalisation, such as the narratives of prostitutes, religious sisters, pioneers and many females previously omitted from the pages of history are increasingly coming to light (Jolly 2002: 267). Auto/biography is the foundation, the warp threads supporting the majority of these stories. These narratives give a voice to previously silenced women by examining and revealing women's lived experience and cultural positions (Leavy 2007: 54).

This has not always been the case. There was also an assumed triviality of content within women's letters and epistolary novels. Linda Kauffman claims that literary history and epistolary tradition leads one to expect women's letters and novels to focus on private emotions (Kauffman 1992: xxiii). Jane Austen comments in *Northanger abbey* that everyone allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female (Binhammer 1993: 107). Erin Sadlack (2005: 2) observes that letters are the often-preferred means for women to communicate. However, she makes the distinction that, far from being personalised, sentimental, emotional narratives, that women's letters are the product of their lived experience and culture, their education and their reading and their intellect (Sadlack 2005: 16). This is evident in *Miss Peabody's inheritance* (Jolley 1984) and *The star garden* (Turner 2007) where both Elizabeth Jolley and Nancy Turner explore the marginalisation of women, lesbianism, loneliness and old age.

Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë are considered two of the most widely read and beloved writers in English literature. Yet, their work was seen as marginal by virtue of their gender and by virtue of their chosen form, including epistolarity. Their work was also deemed marginal literature by the very fact that their work was popular. Within these popular narratives sat biting social commentary and representation of women at odds with the social mores of the day (Shuttleworth 2000: 1), whereas in most of the nineteenth century novels the female protagonists were constructed as religious, modest, passive, submissive, and domestic, (Serrano 2008: 1). Austen and Brontë attempted to dispel the cultural myth of the 'pure, submissive woman' perpetuated by writers exemplified by the later canonically accepted Thomas Hardy (Hardy 1891). In Austen's epistolary novel *Pride and prejudice* (1813) Elizabeth Bennet is portrayed as intelligent, attractive, and witty; Brontë's *Villette* (1853) tells the story of a lively woman's adventures.

This struggle by women for self-representation and recognition continued in colonial cultures where the genre of letter writing was perceived as a female form and was therefore trivialised. This trivialisation stems from women's historical marginalisation from the public sphere. Impeded from occupying the authoritative voice of 'philosophy' and 'science', women's voices were located in the realm of the 'other' most notably the arts and particularly through epistolary writing (Jones 1993: 107). During the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s feminists reinvented the image of the woman letter writer (Jolly 2008: 3). In the same way as Brontë and Austen 'reinvented' the nineteenth century heroine, feminists symbolically tore up love letters to an absent man and wrote letters exploring questions of sexuality, separatism and strategy. This may have contributed to a social and critical climate in

which the epistolary genre can flourish (Campbell 1995: 341). Anthologies such as Olga Kenyon's *800 years of women's letters* (1992) and Lisa Grunwald's *Letters of the century* (2008) which showcases four hundred and twenty three letters, are just two examples of this burgeoning genre, however there is no mention of the epistolary novel in important literary histories from Britain, the United States of America and Australia such as McCleery's *The book history reader* (2001) or Eagleton's *The English novel* (2004). Important epistolary titles by women neglected by canonical texts include Alice Walker's *The colour purple* (1983) despite it having been widely read and produced as a film.

Contemporary epistolary novels, such as Toni Morrison's *A mercy* (2008) emphasise postmodern fragmentation and the disappearance of the grand narrative: the death of the idea that there is one truth, or one explanation for, or approach to why we live our lives the way we do (Wall 2006: 2). Since the 1980s these play in a postmodernist sense with epistolary conventions to produce revolutionary texts (Altman 1982: 195). Australian author, Elizabeth Jolley in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1984) uses letter fragments to weave parallel stories into a novel and blurs the boundaries between both letter and novel. In effect, reader, writer and text are fused. Characters are readers and writers, readers and writers are characters and the text is both fiction and reality at the same time. *The Household Guide to Dying* (2008) includes a journalistic 'Dear Abby' style and there are Austen references galore. Both novels present women telling women's stories, exploring women's place within their culture and valuing women's life experiences (Campbell 1995: 341). They also highlight unspoken cultural assumptions and speak more generally of the human condition: of love, loss and plurality, of how we live in relationships with others. There is constant interaction between mothers and daughters, friends and lovers and penfriends and our unique stories are influenced, not only by these relationships, but also by the society in which we live.

For instance, some contemporary epistolary novels by Australian and British and American authors focus on social issues. A case in point is Lionel Shriver's *We must talk about Kevin* (2003), which explores how society treats mothers and sons. The work of Mary Anne Schaffer and Annie Barrows also comes to mind: *The Guernsey literary and potato peel pie society* (2009) reveals the writing life of the author and the stories of the people living in an English village. It also examines World War Two cultural alienation and isolation. Nancy Turner in *These is my words* (1999) tells the story of the education, literary journey and life of a feisty American pioneer woman. Turner challenges the western myth that portrays early American pioneer women as prostitutes with hearts of gold or martyred stoics. Open discussion of well-researched social and cultural issues can reveal cultural myths and address social misconceptions and injustice (Altman 1982: 62).

In my own writing, I aim to use epistolary novel writing as a political tool for social change. To achieve this I have crossed sociological and literary disciplines and moved from the literary traditions of auto/biographical writing, to the academic enterprise of autoethnography. Autoethnography is a genre of writing in which authors draw on their own lived experiences, connect the personal to the cultural and place the self and others within a social context (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2). Autoethnography is my

methodological loom that holds the autobiographical warp in place while I weave the colourful weft of epistolary fiction through the story. Carolyn Ellis (2002) and Art Bochner argue that autoethnography is a qualitative research method, which extends beyond autobiography because it tests social and historical boundaries and by empowering self and others ‘opens the possibility of cultural transformation’ (Bochner 2000: 270).

During my research I discovered that the focus on *auto* (i.e., self), *ethnos* (i.e., culture) or *graphy* (i.e. the research process) can vary greatly from one author to another. Lincoln and Denzin (2005: 1115) and Ellis and Bochner (2000: 747) place a significant emphasis on subjectivity, Leo Anderson (2006: 373) on a commitment to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. Andrew Sparks (2002: 22) is motivated by a desire to seek interpretive forms of understanding and an aspiration to represent lived experience using a variety of genres. Like Laurel Richardson (2000: 253), I welcome ‘the blurring of genre, ‘the complexity of writing, the shaggy boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction,’ ‘subjective’ and ‘objective,’ ‘true’ and ‘imagined’. I desire my work to be both scientific, in the sense of being true to a world known through the empirical senses, and literary, in the sense of expressing what I have learned through significant writing techniques and form.

According to Ellis, autoethnographers need to look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations (2004: xix). Highly personalised autoethnographic narratives have been criticised for slipping into what Sara Delamont (2007: 4) terms emotionally explicit self-indulgent trauma therapy and excited subjectivity. On the other hand, feminist thinkers such as Hélène Cixous (Sellers 2004), Virginia Woolf (1992) and Clarice Lispector (1989) break through barriers of shame, cowardice and fear to their true vulnerable writing selves. I am attempting to do the same, but find there is a fine line between writing honestly and without reservation, and navel gazing.

Caroline Ellis and Art Bochner are prolific writers who write without reservation. They do not hesitate to bare their souls and produce evocative stories that create the effect of reality; celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail. They encourage compassion and empathy by connecting the practices of social science with the living of life. These stories give the reader insights into how to live life and cope with adversity. This writing is too complex and well researched to be simply labelled, navel gazing. Ellis, Bochner and Denzin are high profile writers and their books and journal articles promote autoethnography as a legitimate method of qualitative research. Autoethnography is still an emerging methodology, constantly being redefined and developing rapidly in communication, education, family therapy thus gaining acceptance in many other disciplines (Ellis 2004: 194).

James Buzard, in his book *Disorienting fiction: The autoethnographic work of nineteenth-century British novels* (2005) argues that autoethnography isn’t ‘new’. He claims that the nineteenth-century British novel’s role in the complex historical process ultimately gave rise to modern anthropology’s concept of culture and its accredited researcher, the ‘participant observer’. Buzard studies the nineteenth-

century novels of Charlotte Brontë and others as ‘metropolitan autoethnographies’ that began to exercise and test the ethnographic imagination decades in advance of formal modern ethnography. In her preface of the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, it is clear that Brontë views her work as an act of social regeneration. She wishes to expose hypocrisies, to unveil or challenge those who find it ‘convenient to make external show pass for sterling worth’ (Brontë 1933: viii). The recollections of her character throughout the novel are infused with a passionate, highly personal sense of injustice. While nineteenth century writers such as Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen may have been the unsuspecting forerunners of autoethnography, the surge in autoethnographic writing in recent years has ensured its place as the most developed form of experimental ethnographic writing (Clough 2000: 279). It posits an alternative logic and encourages innovation.

My novel ‘Hens lay, people lie’ is character based and by utilising the hybrid form I am anticipating that it will be emotionally engaging and marketable. The manuscript began as an auto/biographical epistolary narrative in the style of *84 Charring Cross Road* (1970). The story is based on my chance meeting thirty-five years ago with an older American poet at the Burke and Wills Dig Tree in outback Australia. The aim is to tell the story of our pen friendship and literary journeys through the prism of our letters, diary and journal entries. In ‘Hens lay, people lie’, I have chosen to base my narrative on my own life experience and a collection of letters, diary and journal entries gathered over this thirty-year period. My life experience situates the novel. I am both on the inside and the outside of the text. The autobiographical threads of my life are the warp underpinning my epistolary fictional weft.

Bernard Schlink (2009: 1) advances the argument of the value of fiction. He says, ‘A good documentary makes us understand the full truth, and fiction is able to do the same. It can represent single moments and episodes that makes us aware of the large picture’. Elizabeth Jolley says in her essay, ‘Dwelling in the prose’ (2001: 8)

If you read a novel just for the story you may as well hang yourself. Many novels do not have a story; they provided insight and little scenes suggesting a bigger canvas. The little dance in writing is the use of humour, compassion, extraordinary characters and fresh description in order to lift some of the pain and ugliness that the author is presenting

The primary function of the fictional device of dialogue in narratives is to reveal character, not convey information (King 2007: 145). The truth of my characters personal experience will be achieved via imaginative reconstruction.

I began with my desire to record my friend Martha’s letters, poetry and her amazing life, but now it is encompassing a larger picture no longer weaving Martha’s story or my own but also my ‘Joy’s’ cultural world as well as my literary and educational journey. I am investigating the social constrictions and lack of opportunities for my generation of women within an Australian/American context. Within the framework of my novel (1975–2005) there has been the 9/11 terrorist attack and the Bali Bombing which prompts a lively cross cultural discussion between the American ‘Martha’ and Australian ‘Me’ protagonists, whereas in the beginning I ‘Joy’ was silenced by Martha’s intellect. By the twenty-first century, Joy is educated and

culturally astute. Joy's journey begins in Australia, when, under the Whitlam government mature age students were able to take advantage of free university and TAFE courses to be retrained or enlightened, or to redress education deprivation because of war, finances or gender. The majority accepting the challenge were women. Joy's story validates the benefit of free education for mature aged people. To resume interrupted education opens up a lifeline of opportunities.

To me my texts are elements of a whole, which interweaves my own story, are the seasons, days in the Great Year of my life (Sellers, 1988 p. xv).

Hélène Cixous got it right. Fictionalised personal novels such as 'Hens lay, people lie' use creative epistolarity to reveal and examine social concerns many readers share. These narratives address and give voice to those who suffer illness, oppression, misfortune, and tragedy; but also to those who wish to speak in a spirit of inquiry, amazement and affirmation, even celebration. A combination of autoethnography and epistolarity produces novels that celebrate life and storytelling with the aim of social justice in a language everyone can understand. The result is that contemporary autobiographies have broken out of a generic straight jacket to be a multi faceted and essentially hybrid set of practices which includes fiction.

'Hens lay, people lie' is more than a story of two women and a thirty-year pen friendship, more than the exploration of their literary journey and their struggle to find their place in literary society. This autoethnographic epistolary novel is personal, but also historical, social and political and as such has the power to dispel cultural myths, thus addressing social injustices. It is a tool for social change. The more women writing and publishing innovative self-reflexive creative narratives will inspire and empower other women to weave the colours of their lives and the warp and weft of their stories into the fabric of society, thereby adding to the tapestry of human knowledge.

List of works cited

- Adelaide, Debra 2008 *The household guide to dying* Sydney: Pan Macmillan
- Altman, Janet Gurkin 1982 *Epistolarity: Approaches to a form* Columbus: Ohio State University Press
- Anderson, L 2006 'Analytic autoethnography' *Journal of contemporary ethnography* 35: 4, 373-95
- Austen, Jane 1996 first publication 1813 *Pride and prejudice* London: Penguin Books
- Binhammer, K 1993 'Romantic correspondence: Women, politics and the fiction of letters' *Canadian woman studies*, 14: 1, 107-08
- Bochner, A 2000 'Criteria against ourselves' *Qualitative inquiry* 6: 2, 266-72
- Brontë, Charlotte 1853 *Villette* New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers
- Buzard, James 2005 *Disorientating fiction: The autoethnographic work of nineteenth-century British novels* New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Campbell, E 1995 'Re-visions, reflections, re-creations: Epistolarity in novels by contemporary women' *Twentieth century literature* 41, 334-43
- Clough, Patricia Ticineto 2000 *Autoaffection: Unconscious thought in the age of teletechnology* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

- Delamont, Sarah 2007 in *British educational research association annual conference* University of London: Institute of Education
- Eagleton, Terry 2005 *The English novel: An introduction* Carlton: Blackwell Publishing
- Ellis, Carolyn 2004 *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography* Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press
- Ellis, Carolyn 2002 *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature and aesthetics* New York: AltaMira Press
- Ellis, C and Bochner, A 2000 'Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity,' Denzin, N and Lincoln, Y eds 2000 *Handbook of qualitative research* 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 733-68
- Ellis, C 1999 'Heartfelt autoethnography' *Qualitative health research* 9, 669-83
- Grunwald, Lisa 2008 *Letters of the century: America 1900-1999* New York: The Dial Press
- Gubernatis, Catherine 2007 *The epistolary form in twentieth-century fiction* OhioLink Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Centre, Ohio State University
<http://drc01.drc.ohiolink.edu/handle/2374.OX/8383> (accessed 15 August 2009)
- Hanff, Helen 1970 *84 Charing Cross Road* New York: Grossman (accessed 29 August 2009)
- Hardy, Thomas 1998 first published 1891 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Oxford University Press
- Jolley, Elizabeth 1984 *Miss Peabody's inheritance* New York: Penguin
- Jolley, E 2001 'Dwelling in the prose' *Australian author* 33: 1, 8-9
- Jolly, M 2002 'Confidantes, co-workers and correspondents: Feminist discourses of letter-writing from 1970 to the present' *Journal of European studies to the present* 32, 267-282
- Jolly, Margaretta 2008 *In love and struggle: Letters in contemporary feminism* West Sussex: Columbia Press
- Jones, M 1993 'Reading life writing: An anthology' *Canadian woman studies* 14: 1, 107
- Kauffman, Linda 1992 *Special delivery: Epistolary modes in modern fiction* Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Kendall, Paul Murray 1965 *The art of biography* London: George Allen and Unwin
- Kenyon, Olga 1992 *Eight hundred years of women's letters* Penguin.com (USA): Penguin
- King, Steven 2000 *On writing: A memoir of the craft* New York: Scribner
- La-Trobe University 2009 *La Trobe University: Humanities and Social Sciences: English program Unit for studies in biography and autobiography*, viewed <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/english/usba.html> (accessed 1 September 2009)
- Leavy, Patricia 2007 *Feminist research practice* California: Sage Publications Inc
- Lincoln, Yvonne (ed) 1994 *Qualitative research* Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Lincoln, Y and Denzin, N 2005 'Epilogue: the eighth and ninth moments—qualitative research in/and the fractured future', in Lincoln, Y and Denzin, N eds *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1115-26.
- Lispector, Clarice 1989 *The stream of life* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- McCleery, Alister 2001 *The book history reader* London: Routledge
- Morrison, Toni 2008 *A mercy* New York: Knopf Borzoi Books
- Reed-Danahay, Deborah 1997 ed *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* New York: Oxford Press
- Richardson, L 2000 'Evaluating ethnography' *Qualitative inquiry*, 6: 2, 253-55
- Rosaldo, Michelle 1984 *Toward an anthropology of self and feeling* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- Sadlack, Erin 2005 'In writing it may be spoke: The politics of women letter-writing 1377-1603' PhD thesis Digital Repository at the University of Maryland, College Park Maryland <http://www.lib.umd.edu/drum/handle/1903/2650> (accessed 20 July 2009)
- Schlink, Bernard 2009 *Guaranteeing truth, and avoiding it* <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/guaranteeing-truth-and-avoiding-it/2009/01/09/1> (accessed 19 August 2009)
- Sellers, Susan 1988 *Writing differences: Readings from the seminar of Hélène Cixous* New York: St Martin's Press
- Sellers, Susan 2004 ed *Hélène Cixous: The writing notebooks* London: Continuum
- Serrano, Carey 2008 *Nineteenth century female domesticity: the American and European ideal* <http://www.accd.edu/sac/history/keller/Serr/carey.html> (accessed 25 August 2009)
- Shaffer, Mary Ann and Barrows, Annie 2009 *The Guernsey literary and potato peel pie society* New York: Dial Press
- Showalter, Elaine 1985 ed *The feminist criticism* New York: Pantheon Books
- Shriver, Lionel 2003 *We need to talk about Kevin* Melbourne: Text Publishing Company
- Shuttleworth, S 2000 Introduction and notes, in Smith, M (ed) *Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë* London: Oxford University Press
- Sparks, A 2000 'Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action' *Sociology of sport journal* 17, 21-43
- Stephens, Sonia 2000 *A history of women's writing* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Turner, Nancy 2007 *The star garden: a novel of Sarah Agnes Prine* New York: Thomas Dunne Books
- Wall, S 2006 'An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography' *International journal of qualitative methods*, 5: 2, 2-4
- Walker, Alice 1983 *The colour purple* New York: Washington Square
- Whitting, Glenice 2007 *Pickle to pie* Melbourne: Ilura Press
- Winterson, Jeanette 2001 *The PowerBook* New York: Vintage Press
- Woolf, Virginia 1922 *Jacob's room* United Kingdom: Hogarth Press