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A journey into the margins of creative wilderness

Abstract:

Is the ‘margin’ that place from which writers (readers) stand outside a text-world and its subjects in order to see differently, anew? Does such distancing come about through choice, or is the writer’s (reader’s) location in the margins as observer, creator of narratives (creator of textual meanings) not a choice at all, but a necessary part of the creative process? What happens when the writer is also interested in depicting marginalized characters, whose lives and experiences unfold outside the mainstream, beyond public glare, unrecorded by public/conventional history? In this paper I will explore these questions, drawing on the novel *The Summer Exercises* by Ross Gibson (2008) to illuminate some of the tensions between writers and their subjects, texts and their contexts. The paper aims to demonstrate the centrality of the notion of the margin to innovative creative practice.

Biographical note:

Wendy Glassby is a postgraduate student enrolled in a doctorate in creative writing at Murdoch University, Perth Western Australia. She is writing the fictional stories of marginal characters overlooked in mainstream histories, focusing on members of a non-indigenous and multi-racial community of Papua New Guinea.

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Recently I read the novel *The summer exercises* (Gibson 2008) and, soon after, heard its author, Ross Gibson, speak. Unexpectedly, these two events brought a new direction to my doctoral research. How that happened and, in particular, how Gibson's work caused me to look more closely at the way artists engage in creativity, is the topic of this paper. Ross Gibson is currently Professor of Contemporary Arts at the University of Sydney and, using his words, he also 'makes books, films and audiovisual installations' (Gibson 2009).

Gibson's novel is described by its reviewers as experimental. It is fragmentary and it uses photographic images with diary notes to create a sense of the city of Sydney post World War Two. The diarist is a fictional chaplain who is imagined to have spent the summer of 1946 attached to Sydney's Central Street Police Station where he accompanies police on their rounds. Following Jesuit rituals he records his thoughts and observations, five times a day, and so his notes become 'the summer exercises.' The images are actual crime scene photographs taken in and around Sydney from mid 1940s to 1960 and come from a much larger collection Gibson encountered as co-curator of Sydney's Justice and Police Museum almost a decade and a half before creating the novel. He has also used them within collaborative exhibitions and installations. In all his works, Gibson resists the obvious—the many implied crime stories—in order to make Sydney the subject of his creative process.

Gibson's successful technique of creating fiction from photographs with real-world pasts gifted me a possible solution to a problem I had encountered in my creative writing. This tells fictional stories of marginal characters based on members of an actual community—a non-indigenous and multi-racial community of Papua New Guinea (PNG)—that has been overlooked in mainstream histories. My aim is to arouse curiosity about the community's existence, not to offer its definitive (though imagined) past. Kate Grenville, in her novel *Joan makes history* (1988), inserts many Joans into moments resembling familiar segments of Australian history: Joan, the wife of Captain Cook, for example. She does so confident that Australian readers generally know those moments. I cannot be similarly assured of readers' knowledge of PNG history, but by creatively interweaving historical fact—as Gibson inserts his photographs—I may be able to provide the textured context readers need to imagine my characters living, loving and dying as PNG history happens.

Gibson's novel and lecture also infiltrated my project's theoretical research. This at some level examines writing as a process. Gibson's willing and clear articulation of the shifts and turns along his creative path led to questions about how artists access creativity. One question: what insight had convinced Gibson to reject his first attempt of 180,000 words written in a Raymond Chandler detective style? Another: how had he been inspired to match certain words to specific images when the relationship between the two is often obscure? In his talk, Gibson explained his creative journey began with his awareness of emotions evoked by the images. Only after he'd removed himself from the photographs' original context had they opened up to him creatively (Gibson 2009). I recognised similarities with my own search for inspiration: how I turn inward in my attempt to understand my subject and what I am trying to express. Is this distancing, this moving away from the subject, a choice? Or is there no choice at all? Does creativity *demand* of artists a move into the margins of their subjects to see them in a way that facilitates artistic expression?

There's an excess of literature on 'how-to-write-fiction' suggesting ways to write 'creatively', advice that often attaches 'imagination' to phrases like 'letting your mind roam freely' but rarely articulate how 'imagination' may be accessed and the mind untethered. This implies that with the title of 'writer' comes a key to the frontal lobe of the brain—if that is the site of 'imagination'—and a treasure-chest of ideas located there. I argue Ross Gibson's path to creativity and the spectacular result of that journey—this novel—demonstrate it is not entirely 'imagination' that directs artistic process but perhaps 'intuition'—perceptive insight that, when highly developed (through frequent use) leads to instinctive knowledge. Whatever we might call that place into which writers crawl to analyse, resolve and create, intuition must surely pad the walls and ceilings.

From the margins

Later I will discuss Gibson's practice and his novel but, now, let's look at this process called 'creativity'. As an aid, I use the words of American actor Alan Alda of the MASH series (Lewis 1995-2009). Alda says:

The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover is yourself.

I like Alda's notion. However, articulating what occurs out there in the wilderness rarely happens, though indisputably excursions happen often, as all manner of people find unusual and interesting ways to write or express themselves artistically. Does this reticence come through artistic superstition? Are we artists worried about losing our 'mojo'/of offending the 'gift' provider and being barred from precious intuitions, if we let slip? Or perhaps there are no words for such a complex process.

When clarity does come and words flow, what do we call it? Francesca Rendle-Short (2007) uses the word 'alchemy = a miraculous transformation' when she discusses the success of the University of Canberra's experimental lunchtime discussions called Artists Talk, where practising artists 'in all manner of artforms' share their imaginative processes. Despite her metaphoric reference to glass-making and miraculous transformations from quartz powder, seaweed ash and manganese, even Rendle-Short submits to a desire to 'wander. And wonder' and to let her imagination 'roam freely' (2007: 2-4).

Novelists, too, tend to perpetuate the mystery with their cryptic replies to interviewers. And can you blame them? They probably just 'do it', and it 'works', so why explain? Normally plain-speaking Tasmanian Richard Flanagan is reported to credit the seed of his novel *Wanting* (Flanagan 2008) to 'a single image of a painting of Mathhina, the child taken in and abandoned by Sir John Franklin and Lady Jane that lodged itself in his consciousness almost a quarter of a century before (Sibree 2008). Right, Richard, you have your idea, but then what? Louis Nowra, one of Australia's most prolific writers, says his novel *Ice* (Nowra 2008) was inspired by a dream of an iceberg being towed into Sydney Harbour and it became a book, he says, when he imagined a man buried in the ice (Callahan 2008). But, Louis, what happens between a dream and a novel? Vikram Seth (2002: 16-17), author of *A Suitable Boy* claims 'each book, each novel, is inspired by a different germ', *A Suitable Boy* by a shard of conversation—'You too will marry a boy I

choose’—and that ‘too’ caused the novel to begin at a wedding. British writer Hilary Mantel (2002: 68) says ‘there’s a process by which you almost become sensitised to your material—it almost seems mysterious the way you’re led towards the things that you ought to be reading or conversation that you might strike up.’ Isobelle Carmody (2002: 104) says inspiration strikes as she writes; for Eva Sallis (2002: 173) ‘inspiration comes from everywhere and is a synthesis of things that need to happen in the writing.’ An image, a dream, eavesdropping, a gift, or mysteries—yet nothing about how these are transformed.

My frontal lobe can imagine Flanagan, Nowra and others with seeds of future novels percolating away but, not a scientist, I cannot explain the neural processes: how an idea becomes action. However, for this paper I am going to call that place—Alda’s wilderness/where Flanagan’s image and Nowra’s dream have resided in waiting—‘the margin’ of artistic process. From this assumption I will claim as Alda’s excursion, words from my introduction: ‘distancing to see anew’, and I will say that as artists sit in the wilderness—or for this paper, in ‘the margin’—and look inward to the imagination/frontal lobe in which is stored knowledge, experience and intuitive understanding, a transformation occurs (Rendle-Short’s alchemy): a new way of seeing—sometimes called ‘inspiration’—that directs the process. This is not a miracle, not magic, but intense and sometimes prolonged thought, through which an artist immerses herself into her subject. I wonder: as only the artist knows the pain of creation, is it the memory of that pain that inhibits articulation of the process?

Writers as do-ers

Very quickly I can spin away from this ‘magical’ quality of a writer’s inspiration into the tension between literary theory and writing praxis currently a hot topic in tertiary institutions around Creative Writing degrees and postgraduate studies. From a writers’ perspective, Australian author Rod Jones claims fiction writers have a schizoid nature, where ‘the fractured self of the writer’ (Jones 1988: 5) deals with the direct opposition of thinking in images and needing to communicate. This shows itself through a distrust of literary theory, as some writers perceive too much thought about theoretical matters disrupts creativity or as some—including Brian Dibble—have said, creativity undergoes paralysis by analysis (Dibble and von Loon 2002: 4). Jones suggests this fissure between needing to communicate and remaining in the dark space of imagination extends into a series of oppositions: ‘conscious/unconscious, symbolic/imaginary, political/poetic, realistic/Romantic, and public/private’ (1988: 5). I suggest this strange relationship between the creativity of writing praxis and the functionality of theory has shown itself in at least one outlet in academia within a debate over Writing Theory and/or Literary Theory that appeared in *TEXT* in April 2002 between Brian Dibble and Julienne van Loon. For Dibble (2002: 4), literary theory is ‘*episteme* and *techne*’ or, loosely, ‘knowledge of the systems and its elements, and knowledge of how to apply them in some practical way.’ Dibble argues towards teaching via theory and argues that we become better writers through becoming better readers. Van Loon argues (not necessarily dismissing Dibble’s theory of the good reader) for a broadening of academic notions of writing praxis. Van

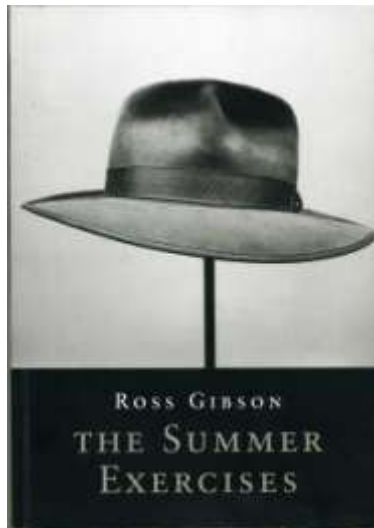
Loon strengthens her argument by quoting Derrida, a quote to which I have returned. Derrida (1974: 9) says:

For now we tend to say ‘writing’...to designate not only physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription but also the totality of what makes it possible...All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected to these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves.

This, for van Loon, leads to a legitimate field of writing that develops the notion of readers/writers/researchers as informed practitioners with a creative endeavour (that is, writers as ‘do-ers’), and this simultaneously permits a broad interpretation of the notion of ‘text’. Does it all come down, then, to the ‘do-ing’? Is it only if and when an artist sets out to find a solution that the process of creativity takes over?

How Gibson did it (part I)

To his lecture audience Gibson admitted his inspiration began when he extracted fewer than two hundred images from tens of thousands of negatives. That’s when he began his relationship with his subject. For over a decade he struggled to articulate the feelings triggered by those images, or to find an appropriate form for a novel; those emotions magnified by the challenge of the images: never completely knowable. All that remains of what anchored them to their original context are some notes scribbled on the envelopes that hold them: mostly only crime, location and date of each photograph. Is it because of, or despite, Gibson’s struggle that he has been able to produce this marvellous and unusual novel?



Let’s look at the book itself. It is a sight to be seen—a visual pleasure, you might say—and reading it is indeed a visual experience. In the bookstore, or in my hand, the cover of Gibson’s book, in its tones of grey, stands as plain and as proud as the image that appears on it: a man’s felt hat upon its stand.

Another two images appear on the back cover:

an abandoned motor vehicle



and part of a woman's face.

Within the cover text a fleeting and intriguing paragraph: 'Investigation is mostly a question of how you edit the glimmers. The luminous face of a wife gone missing and found in a peep show porn film.'

Do these words refer to the cropped face of the back cover? Each reader must find his/her own answer but can never expect any satisfactory explanation of this or any image. That phrase—'how you edit the glimmers'—must surely be an acknowledgement of the novel's fragmentary nature, and a suggestion that it must be read by picking and choosing from the many ways images and words might be interpreted. Perhaps it confirms no part of this novel, from the front cover to the back, is without purpose. Gibson wants his readers to 'feel', rather than to 'know'.

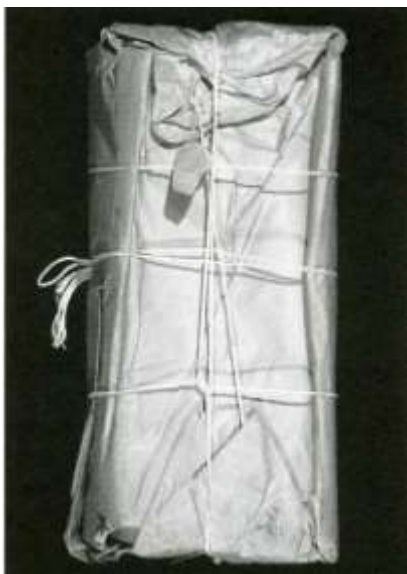
The black and whites—those photographs, so stark and shadowless—bring to their reading an emotional response rather than understanding. This is what makes images into 'art', says Australian philosopher and author Elizabeth Grosz, who claims art is not 'primarily or solely conceptual', but about sensation, and about 'the most animal part of us rather than the most human part of us...and that's what makes it of potential interest everywhere' (Elizabeth Grosz: *The creative impulse*, 2005). We respond instinctively or intuitively to images. In this novel, those responses are complicated by residual links to each

photograph's various pasts, reminders of which are contained in cover text and introduction (called Director's Notes because it's written by the director of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, which not only manage the photographic collection so has a vested interest in that past but also co-published this novel with UWA Press). And there's a List of Illustrations, a catalogue of images used, which begins with a declaration that includes these words (2008: 282):

They [the crime scene photographs] are deployed respectfully to generate mood and a sense of place. In reality the characters and events and settings described in the text bear no direct relationship to the photographs.

The main body of text is divided into chapters entitled Days, one through twenty-nine, with a title page for each that is a photograph. Days (except the last) are divided into five exercises and labelled accordingly as 1.1, 1.2, and 2.1, and so on. The exercises vary in content, from one or two lines, often poetic, to some denser or longer narratives, mostly in a voice that suggests they are private observations. These consist of agonised outpourings, lists of criminals or crimes, and reports. A regular appearance is made by Inspector Machin with whom the chaplain spends his days and, occasionally, the narrative traces one investigation or a particular character over several days, but there is no sustained conventional storyline about any one person, if any more than a loose tale about the chaplain. Interspersed with the exercises are photographs.

The Days also contain sections called Publishers' Notes through which readers learn early in the novel that fictional publishers are publishing exercises and images. As the Notes reflect the publishers' retrospective concerns over the material, piece-by-piece they provide a back-story. This is necessary: the images are not labelled and exercises only articulate the chaplain's viewpoint. While the Notes are valuable to the reading of the novel, their placement is haphazard, and seemingly a deliberate ploy to destabilize the reader's process of interpretation. An example is provided by the first image of the book: an image of a rectangular brown-paper-covered-and-string-tied package.



Its placement prior to the title page implies significance, yet not until the end of Day 25 (almost the end of the book) do the Notes reveal in such a package the chaplain's exercises and a bundle of crime scene photographs came to the publishers. Adding to the ambiguity is the image's description in the List of Illustrations (2008: 282):

p.2 Bomb sent to private citizen, CIB Headquarters, 1 July 1950. FB08_0161_002.

To varying degrees and by many means, a response of ambivalence is encouraged throughout. Certainties become uncertain. Assumptions easily unravel. At times a connection between an image and an exercise seems obvious, but mostly relationships between the two are difficult to comprehend. This deliberately evoked uncertainty ensures readers are not distracted from the subject, a sensation of Sydney during the summer of 1946: a city filled with Yanks, lost and bewildered servicemen returning from the war, and the pain and suffering of those that happen to cross the path of the chaplain.

A demonstration: (Gibson 2008: 112–13)

10.1 In your organs, in your glands, the war is revisiting every day.



The image: a man with a suitcase striding across a street.

Is it possible to ignore the questions? For which crime is this photograph evidence? Why those words with that image? Without that past (which never completely disappears), how many possible stories can this image tell? Only one certainty: Sydney of 1946.

The novel summarised

The summer exercises is a novel that draws together a series of exercises, dissociated images and speculations of fictional publishers. The city of Sydney is its main character, brought to life through the retrospective publishing of notes from handwritten ledgers that have come into the publishers' possession together with a bundle of negatives, years after the time of their production in the summer of 1946. The real-world photographs that appear in the novel and the fictional negatives share a past as crime scene photographs. Through the fictional publication of this material the chaplain, the writer of Jesuit-

ritualised exercises, and his companion, Inspector Machin, make their appearance in the narrative. Scattered throughout both words and images are numerous criminals, victims, crime scenes, and miscellaneous sites and objects

How Gibson did it (part II)

Only when Gibson was able to let go of an image of a brown-paper-wrapped-and-string-tied package that was a bomb sent to a private citizen, and saw instead a brown-paper-wrapped-and-string-tied package containing the sensitive and astute observations of a priest—a man whose career made him open to the wounds and hurts of ordinary citizens—did Gibson cease his attempt to articulate the photographs as objects and, instead, captured the sense of Sydney they evoked. This, for Viktor Shklovsky, would be the moment Gibson's work became art. For Shklovsky (1965: 20):

art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*...*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.*

Only out of the struggle and resulting introspection—the constant turning over and examining of his subject/probing and testing of his words and phrases/ placement of the images—did Gibson achieve what he intuited to be the story he wanted to tell. The artistic design of this book—the way it uses the images—is a testament to Gibson's insight into the power of the images. It enables him to re-create the challenge of the images for his readers that his text reiterates. His sometimes poetic, always careful and often cryptic prose also refuses to give freely.

Conclusion

The products of creativity may surprise even those of us that seek them. They are often so surprising, we may convince ourselves there's a mysterious or magical component to their creation. Rather, however, such creations are born through an artist's desire to communicate her passions and a willingness to commit to the process. As Gibson and his novel powerfully demonstrate, there, as the artist is compelled into the margins of her subjects, within that dark private space away from all that is 'habitual' (Shklovsky 1965), art is created.

List of illustrations

The following images have been scanned from the book *The summer wxercises* (Gibson 2008) with permission granted by author Ross Gibson, email 28 August 2009

Page 4 Front cover (Gibson 2008) available image file IGAref028.jpeg

Page 5a Abandoned vehicle, rear cover, identified in Gibson (2008) as 'Traffic accident, Katoomba, 1955' available image file IGAref031.jpeg

Page 5b Women's face, rear cover, identified in Gibson (2008) as 'Stabbing, City Central, 1955' available image file IGAref029.jpeg

Page 6 Identified in Gibson (2008) as 'p2 Bomb sent to private citizen, CIB Headquarters, 1 July 1950. FP08_0161_002' available image file IGAref027.jpeg

Page 7 Identified in Gibson (2008) as 'p113 Belmore Park, no crime specified, 1 March 1950 FP08_0046_003' available image file IGaref033.jpeg

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