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**Strange bedfellows or compatible partners: the problem of genre in the twenty first century verse novel**

Abstract:

The verse novel has become increasingly popular in Australia since Les Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980) and Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) appeared. Although it has a literary pedigree, the contemporary verse narrative for adults has blossomed into an edgy, volatile form. It has absorbed techniques from its literary forbears, ploughing over their metaphorical bones and building distinctive new structures. This essay focuses on the generic identity of the Australian verse novel at its most innovative, which can be said to embody the tensions between poetry and narrative. It defines the verse novel and then briefly considers selected adult and young adult exemplars to provide context. It also includes my experience writing a verse novel that combines poetry and prose. A central question addressed is whether the verse novel is a marriage made in heaven or hell between incompatible partners. Has it hardened into a form with recognisable markers, or is it still in flux, thereby maintaining its profile as a genre-in-the-making at the cutting edge of literary innovation? Bakhtin's theory about stratified literary languages ('generic, period-bound' 1981: 272), which is another manifestation of heteroglossia, illuminates the way in which genres interact in the verse novel. Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* (1994), which marries major and minor genres, and Diane Fahey's *The Mystery of Rosa Morland* (2008), praised as a 'glittering poem/novella,' provide instructive examples. Building on Heinz Insu Fenkl's concept of interstitial genres (Fenkl 2003: Kroll 2010), I argue that intermittent consciousness of genre is integral to a verse novel's meaning. At its most challenging, the verse novel is interstitial, a liminal, always becoming form that does not privilege either poetry or narrative, but rather finds power in a perpetual give and take between their techniques.

Biographical note:

Professor Jeri Kroll, Program Coordinator of Creative Writing at Flinders University in Adelaide, has published over twenty titles for adults and young people, including poetry, picture books and novels. *The Mother Workshops*, *Creative Writing Studies* and *felis domestica* are recent books. In 2009, she was a Visiting Fellow at George Washington University (USA) collaborating on a staged reading of her verse novel, *Vanishing Point*, and later took up a Varuna Fellowship to finish the novel. In 2011, Palgrave will publish *Research Methods in Creative Writing* and Picaro Press a selection of children's poems.

Keywords:

Verse novel—Interstitial—Heteroglossia—Liminal

Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead.  
William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' (35)

## 1 Introduction

The verse novel has undergone a renaissance in Australia, the US and the UK since the 1980s. Although it has a venerable literary pedigree, tracing ancestors back to the classical and medieval epic and romance before finding closer relatives in eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century century incarnations,<sup>1</sup> the contemporary verse narrative for adults has blossomed into an edgy, volatile form. It has absorbed techniques from its literary forbears, ploughing over their metaphorical bones and building distinctive new structures. In order to rise from those ancestor's bones, however, did it obliterate cultural or generic memory or was it fertilised by past generations? A more pointed question is whether the young adult verse novel, which has been in the ascendant in Australia since the 1990s, differs from its adult relatives.

This essay cannot attempt to answer all those questions. It focuses, therefore, on the generic identity of the Australian verse novel at its most innovative, which can be said to embrace the tensions between poetry and narrative. By considering briefly selected adult and young adult verse novels to provide context, as well as my experience writing a work that combines poetry and prose, I explore whether the verse novel is a marriage made in heaven or hell between incompatible partners. Has it hardened into a form with recognisable markers, or is it still in flux, thereby maintaining its profile as a genre-in-the-making at the cutting edge of literary innovation? Building on my essay that explores Heinz Insu Fenkl's concept of interstitial genres (Fenkl 2003: Kroll 2010), I argue that the verse novel forces writers and readers to question the collaboration between poetry and narrative. At its most challenging, it is interstitial, a liminal, always becoming form that does not privilege either element, but rather finds power in a perpetual give and take between their techniques.

## 2 Trajectories

In Australia, the verse novel's popularity has grown since Les Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral: a novel sequence*, was published in 1980. This tale of ordinary rural people was told in a polished vernacular and fashioned into a flexible sonnet form. Vikram Seth's best-selling *The Golden Gate* (1986) reached Australian shores five years later and, with the kind of publicity generated for overseas writers, became widely known for its verbal pyrotechnics and trendy Californian story. Novelist Matt Rubinstein describes his excitement upon reading it in his Adelaide University English One class and attributes his choice of the Pushkin sonnet for his Vogel short-listed verse novel *Solstice* (1994) to Seth's influence (Rubinstein 2008).<sup>2</sup> Of course both were indebted to Alexander Pushkin's 'Novel in Verse,' *Eugene Onegin* (1823-1831).<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Mikhail Bakhtin uses *Onegin* as an example of a 'heteroglossia ...' that 'is an encyclopedia of the styles and languages of an epoch ... and is responsible for the authentically novelistic style of this work' (Bakhtin 1981: 329).

The Australian adult and young adult verse novel has followed an idiosyncratic path overall. It has not developed in tandem with the poem cycle or long poem per se<sup>4</sup> as in the United States, which had its first incarnation in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1891-1892). Patrick Murphy conceives of the verse novel now, not as a longer version of the poetic cycle or a variation of the poetic autobiography, but as 'a new type of American long poem ... a genre that cannot be described by means of previous historical genre definitions, such as romance, epic, or chronicle' (1989: 57). In a global context, poets can no longer, he argues, rely on 'a single, shared identity of national consciousness, cultural values, and religious beliefs...' (Murphy 1989: 59) – a hallmark of epic. Sauerberg refines this idea by claiming the 'epic' elements of popular, literary and verse novels are postmodern permutations on epic form – already 'taken over by "historical novelists and directors of so-called "e[pic]" films"' (2004: 441). This instability and self-consciousness affects how authors manipulate verse-novel structure and characterisation, since they have chosen to work in a largely unpopular mode, poetry, and must therefore address what kind of relationship they will establish with readers who might be more conversant with the conventions of the small and large screen than with literary ones (Sauerberg 2004: 449).

The young adult verse novel has followed yet another trajectory in Australia and the United States, where it finds its most successful exponents. According to Joy Alexander (2005), new technologies have affected young people's ways of reading enough to condition the narrative voice of the verse novels targeting them. She ignores possible literary forbears, asserting that 'the genre has arisen apparently spontaneously in both Australia and the United States (2005: 269).<sup>5</sup> Whereas Murphy (1989: 58, 60) and Sauerberg (2004: 444) see the rhythms of ordinary speech favoured in the adult verse novel stemming from a tradition that began with twentieth-century modernism (which eschewed epic's heightened language and Romanticism's lushness), Alexander harks back only as far as Marshall McLuhan and his contention that "'our age translates itself back into the oral and auditory modes because of the electronic pressure of simultaneity'" (Alexander 2005: 270). In other words, young people are saturated with visual and auditory stimuli that privilege image and message, and need to be coaxed to engage with printed texts, especially those, like poetry, which demand an active response to nuanced language.

### 3 The Problem of Definitions

Murphy, Sauerberg and Alexander wrestle with definitions, suggesting that the genre is still in flux. They agree that extended narrative must be to the fore with 'plots that evolve in time and are advanced through either the type of narrators normally associated with prose fiction or the types of speech normally associated with drama' (Murphy 1989: 58). This gives the verse novel leeway to emphasise the poetry or the fiction depending on need and, as we shall see in a moment, 'need' seems to vacillate between what the work and what the publicity machine demand. The most comprehensive definition is that offered by Sauerberg:

The late twentieth-century verse novel shares with the prose novel its reliance on a strong narrative drive, mimesis of the world-as-we-know-it, a foregrounding of the

subject(human agent) as part of the cast and/or in a narrative stance. To this it adds the formal element of verse, which works its effects by the visual impact of the graphic units of verse and stanza ... (2004: 447).<sup>6</sup>

To this definition we might add a Bakhtinian twist. Both Murphy (1989) and Sauerberg (2005) believe Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in novelistic discourse useful for understanding this form's manipulation of voice, since 'every "utterance," oral or written, takes place as an act of communication between speakers in a given cultural environment' (Murphy 1989: 59). This interaction can be extended to the contract between reader and writer; readers expect certain generic conventions to be followed and writers know that varying these can evoke a variety of responses, including frustration and delight. In particular, Bakhtin argues that literary language '...in turn is also stratified into languages (generic, period-bound and others)' (Bakhtin 1981: 272); but, since heteroglossia is dynamic as well as static<sup>7</sup>, these generic or period-bound languages will mutate, testifying to the time and place of a work's composition. The prevalence of free-verse, colloquial young adult novels (Alexander speaks of their "'house style'" [2005: 269]) in contemporary Australia and the US supports this contention.

I do not have space to test the above definitions against a range of novels, but considering the titles and packaging of a selection indicates their usefulness in revealing confusion about genre and audience. Generic elusiveness is enhanced by subtitles that contemporary writers and/or their marketing departments apply, identifying them with one genre only, claiming equal generic status or privileging one over the other. For example, Dorothy Porter's award-winning *The Monkey's Mask* (1994) does not shy away from its poetic roots; its inside flap heightens anticipation by announcing: 'You are about to do something you have never done before. You are about to read a poem 264 pages long' (1994). Testimonials gracing the back cover of the 1994 reprint highlight Porter's poetic gifts. By the time of *Wild Surmise* (2002), Porter is claimed as a prime exponent of the verse novel and her earlier forays are identified as such in her credits, differentiating them from her poetry collections.<sup>8</sup> To complicate the defining process with another indeterminate genre stirred into the mix, Diane Fahey's back-cover blurb of *The Mystery of Rosa Morland* (2008) praises it as a 'glittering poem/novella,' suggesting the potential of the verse novel to transgress generic boundaries.

In the young adult arena, the labelling issue also arises.<sup>9</sup> Alexander talks about the verse novel 'in children's fiction' (2005: 269) that replicates the colloquial tone of much prose fiction.<sup>10</sup> Steven Herrick's *love, ghosts and nose hair* (1996), the first verse novel for young adults in Australia, is identified as such; Herrick admits that Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* inspired him (Kroll 2001: 24). *The Simple Gift* (2000) is called a 'free verse novel' (back cover), yet a novel on the front and title page. Libby Hathorn's *Volcano Boy* (2001) is deemed 'A Novel In Verse' on its inside title page, but its back cover wording identifies it as a 'verse novel' as well as a 'powerful prose poem.' The choice of 'prose poem' to identify a 190-page work says more about a blurb writer's insecurity with the poetry within than to an understanding of a complex genre like the prose poem. At the other extreme, Tim Sinclair's *Nine Hours North* (2006), a 'bittersweet novel' (back cover), never mentions the word poetry in its

pages. All these imprecise descriptions suggest not only concern about the verse novel's reception by its reading public but a lack of understanding of the genre (and its potential) itself.

#### 4 An Interstitial Genre

The cistern contains: the fountain overflows.

William Blake (36)

Is the verse novel a partnership destined not to last or to deepen, given this hedging of authorial and marketing bets? What kind of dialogue does it set up between its partners?<sup>11</sup> I will argue that the most innovative examples of this hybrid genre fit into a class of works that academic and novelist Heinz Insu Fenkl designates 'interstitial' (2003: 1). Writers and readers must question this hybrid genre consciously and unconsciously as they read, asking, 'Why this collaboration, why this tension between poetry and narrative?' What kind of new form emerges from their interplay? The most challenging verse novel is 'a form of writing that defies genre classification' (Fenkl 2003: 3) too, a liminal work that is always becoming, where the text migrates from one category to another as need dictates in order to arrive at a new frontier. An interstice, such as a crack in a doorway through which light escapes, is usually empty, but an interstitial entity is caught between two things permanently.

Applying this term to his book, *Memories of My Ghost Brother* (1997), described and sold as first a novel and then a memoir, Fenkl unpacks the motile concept of genres in the twenty-first century, where instability and opportunistic hybridity reign. Labels such as mainstream and literary fiction, romance, chick lit, crime fiction, police procedurals, fantasy, speculative and science fiction, memoir and life writing, just to name a few, seep into each other. Their boundaries have the arbitrariness of disputed territories; or they inhabit a kind of 'DMZ' (Fenkl 2003: 3) and their value, Fenkl argues, adapting Homi Bhabha (1994: 2), is not absolute but negotiated by personal and cultural context. Readers of interstitial works can either be aware or not of these tensions. The more successful the hybrid genre becomes, the more likely it will consolidate its identity *as a discrete genre* with its own conventions. The verse novel has not yet achieved that hardening, however.

Let us consider two innovative verse novels that might be described as interstitial. Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* marries major and minor genres. It is at once a collection of poems, a variation on the hard-boiled detective novel, a crime thriller and an anti-romance of sexual passion (lesbian and straight). Porter herself explains that she wanted 'to challenge the notion that prose owns fiction' (May 2007). At Writers' Week 2008, she revealed that she was cognizant of her forbears; when she composed verse novels she 'ha[d] the great narrative poets by her – Homer, Virgil' (6 March 2008), for inspiration and direction. Her artistic process, however, emphasised the poet, for she wrote poems individually and then considered their order, fashioning them into a taut plot. Despite these seeming differences, Porter felt that 'crime fiction and poetry [were] an absolute natural fit' (2007), because of their intensity: 'Poetry as a narrative form often dealt with life in extremis' (2007). For Porter, that seems to mean love, sex and death. In *El Dorado* (2007), her last verse novel published before

she died, she colonised the serial killer subgenre and yet, like a nuanced literary novel, she developed another major subject line, the enduring power of friendship (2007).

All of Porter's verse novels demonstrate this complex ethos, displaying highly charged language, visceral imagery, poetic distillation and filmic pace.<sup>12</sup> Her lyrics function like sound bites that capture character and mood when there is no time for a lengthy interview; the eye scans the page, the internal ear hears the words and the mind absorbs a sensory complex. Within a breath or two, the blink of an eye, readers finish a poem and move on. Yet that moving on is also driven by plot necessity to find out what happens next. Of all the poets working in Australia, Porter has achieved that balance between lyrical power and plot urgency typical of the crime novel by mating poetry with narrative to produce a form that never loses sight of its dual origins. When we consider what seem to be contradictory remarks about the verse novel, we can see how that symbiosis is integral to how Porter's function. She called it 'quite a conservative art' (2008), but then compared narrative poetry to 'white water rafting' (2008), highlighting the risk and excitement it can generate.

Diane Fahey's *The Mystery of Rosa Morland* (2008), identified on its back cover as a poem/novella, is an idiosyncratic construction that displays attributes of an interstitial form. With its cast of characters, it possesses a Bakhtinian sense of the way in which speech or 'utterance,' because it is 'ideologically saturated' (Bakhtin 1981: 271), reveals background. Fahey draws her characters from various strata of late Victorian society; in classic Agatha Christie fashion they gather on a train speeding away from London, seat of Empire, on New Year's Eve 1900. Instead of a list of dramatis personae Fahey presents a 'Sleeping Car Plan and List of Travellers' before the action begins. A tour de force that doesn't always quite succeed, this work reconceives the Gothic and detective genres in feminist terms with a complex structure that reflects on the stifling effects of convention and celebrates the redemptive power of the imagination. Verse monologues that introduce character and move the plot forward are interspersed with extracts from Rosa Morland's Gothic novels – and Rosa Morland is the nom de plume of Elinor, Lady Maldonbury, whose possibly murderous Bluebeard of a husband disappears during the journey.

Yet when the story proper concludes without resolving this multi-layered mystery, the book does not, for readers are offered Biographies (91-129) that fulfil the duties of epilogues, extending this verse narrative in prose. Readers do not return to Fahey's poetry again per se, but the final block in this structural edifice is another extract from Rosa's novels that, like the others, cleverly utilises pastiche to integrate motifs and characters from earlier poems and fictions. Fahey's manipulation of Gothic and detective tropes consciously frustrates therefore. As Bakhtin suggests, just as individuals select an appropriate mode of expression depending on circumstance, so writers select a genre to suit their purposes: 'Consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having to choose a language*. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself...' (Bakhtin 1981: 295). Fahey has occupied the Gothic, Detective and Biography genres in order to allow her text to draw readers in. This book does not want to function as a unified hybrid then. While existing

outside the bounds of the tight temporal verse schema of the sleeping car mystery, the extracts and biographies comment thematically and generically. Social and literary conventions, with their limited view of life and art, are partly what this work exposes. So the prose and poetry speak to and critique each other, saturated with the ideological and literary baggage of their genres, while this interstitial work as a whole rises above its parts to reflect on the possibility of renewal in the twentieth century when class, gender and in fact genre barriers start to crumble.

## **5 The Poet, the Novelist, her Characters and one Lover**

I want to develop a theory about the verse novel as it has evolved to reflect as much on its potential future as on its current state. Can we speak of a verse novel as merely the sum of its parts? Can we critique it focusing on one genre and not the other? Can a verse novel include prose, the conventional language of narrative? Is it an organic bipartite whole, Siamese twins who cannot survive alone? Is it rather like a species that has incorporated alien genes, producing something not only new, but more vigorous, something that performs in ways nothing else can?

Before attempting to respond to those questions, I want to consider what the experience of writing a verse novel – one that also includes prose – resembles.<sup>13</sup> Although usually the poet while composing, I felt the novelist hovering behind my chair, directing me to keep the narrative moving. If I left in frustration to make coffee because a poem wouldn't gel, she whispered just to confuse me, 'Don't lose the plot.' In good times my third self – the critic – watched with relief while each artist raided the other's box of tricks for effects: strong narrative drive in the poetry, poetic language in the prose. I hope my three selves have learned to collaborate, stealing from each other, striking harmonious or discordant notes for the greater glory of the whole. A verse novel has to be more than the simple sum of its parts. In order to succeed, it has to internalise the divisions. Yet from another perspective, those divisions, the crossing of genres, is also one of the subjects.

Which brings me back to my earlier questions that I argue now I do not have to answer, because I propose that a verse novel is an interstitial work, one that creates and then lives within a permanent liminal space that keeps alive the tensions between poetry and narrative. At times it might highlight the margins of each genre, at others dissolve them, so that alternatively readers will be aware and then not of reading something that is a poem or a story. As Fenkl theorises about 'interstitial works [they] maintain a consciousness of the boundaries they have crossed or disengaged with; they present a clear awareness of the kinds of subtexts which might be their closest classifiable counterparts' (Fenkl 2003: 4). The work appeals to readers' preferences for poetry, prose or a variety of subgenres, and then manipulates their generic reading habits so that they must participate in an aesthetic experiment with each encounter.<sup>1</sup> If a verse novel is conceived of as a developing nation, a genre with its own newly formed conventions, it has two dominant groups, each with its own language, and for the good of the whole they must learn how to cooperate.

And then there are my characters that speak in their own voices, some in poetry, some in prose. They always demand to be heard, but have to be kept in line for the

good of the story. Two of them – the hero and her lover – want to have sex, but the poet convinced them not to be overly explicit, although the novelist had her doubts. ‘Think of the readers,’ someone whispered. It’s important for them to be satisfied as well. But who are my readers? My verse novel, *Vanishing Point*, is not only multi-voiced but also multi-genred in another way. With a seventeen-year-old protagonist, Diana, it could qualify as a crossover work. Its subjects include anorexia, bulimia, horse racing, Downs Syndrome, generational conflict and the benefits of psychiatry. It is a complex system that might or might not collapse. What all of the above demonstrates, however, is that the liminal space that a verse novel occupies ensures that the language of poetry and of fiction ebbs and flows to make a kind of meaning impossible without both.<sup>2</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

According to Margaret Atwood (2002), the only point of contact that counts between writers and readers is ‘the page ... where an invisible hand has previously left some marks for you [the reader] to decipher’ (2002: 126). In an innovative verse novel, should readers with keen vision be able to see, as they move through the text, not only printed words but generic boundaries, which might gradually appear as if they had been drawn in invisible ink? I have argued that intermittent consciousness of genre is integral to an innovative verse novel’s meaning and necessary if it is to reach its full potential. Exponents create a transgressive whole where boundaries dissolve and reform. This incremental dynamic manipulates generic echoes and tensions to keep readers aware, as Fenkl suggests, of the form’s ‘potentialities’ (2003:5). These types of verse novels can be called interstitial because they inhabit a liminal space where generic languages and conventions engage in ongoing dialogue. They succeed depending on how well they negotiate this conversation.

## Endnotes

1. Epics, which carry a culture’s first stories, were followed by a variety of extended verse narratives in the middle ages, including Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Medieval romances gave way to Cervantes’ picaresque prose fiction *Don Quixote* in seventeenth-century Spain and the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century England, which began to supplant poetry as the dominant narrative mode.

2. *Solstice* was adapted into a musical drama (adapted by Rubinstein and workshopped with Magpie Theatre) that premiered at the Adelaide Festival in 1996 and starred, among others, Kate Ceberano supported by a jazz trio. I saw it performed outside in an amphitheatre on a balmy Adelaide autumn night.

3. Pushkin himself, called ‘the Byron of Russia’ (Yarmolinsky 1943: vii), acknowledged his debt to *Don Juan* (1818-1823).

4. This is not to say that Australian writers did not produce poem cycles or themed collections, but they did not form part of a tradition. Poets such as Andrew Taylor and Philip Salom, for example, published more than one innovative work – *the crystal absences, the trout* (Taylor) and *The Well Mouth* (Salom). The latter, in particular, with its tripartite structure and central consciousness (a murdered woman), performs ‘in some ways as a verse novel or poetic drama – Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) married to Alice Sebold’s *the Lovely Bones* (Kroll 2002).’

5. She adds, ‘...with the UK beginning to produce some examples too.’

6. '...realized as pauses when read aloud, the prosodic emphasis of rhythm, and the semantic configurations arising from rhyme, whether internal or end rhyme' (Sauerberg 2004: 447).
7. '...such is the fleeting language of a day, of an epoch, a social group, a genre, a school and so forth' (Bakhtin 1981: 272).
8. Judy Johnson's historical work, *Jack* (2006), is described as a verse novel, as is Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune* (1999). There are numerous other examples.
9. Note Katharine England's review, 'Teen Verse Novels,' of four in the *Advertiser* (Sat 20 July 2002, 13). Margaret Wild's history as a creator of 'taut picture-book texts' introduces a review of *Jinx*. Libby Hathorn's *Volcano* is called a 'prose poem' as well as a verse novel. The review of Catherine Bateson's *Painted Love Letters* begins, 'More prose than poem ...'
10. As well, she notes a preponderance of first-person narrators telling stories in free verse that 'portray...a teenage character experiencing the angst of adolescence...' (271). Even those verse novels that depart from this pattern, employing multiple perspectives and/or figurative language, emphasise the colloquial and the vernacular' (274). I do not have space to investigate US examples here, so I have concentrated on Australian work only.
11. The poet, printer, prophet and boundary breaker William Blake, whose life straddled the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tested out generic cooperation, integrating poetry, prose and art in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1792-93),<sup>1</sup> as in other of his works.
12. *The Monkey's Mask* was adapted as a feature film (2000) as well as a radio play, which points to its complex nature comprising highly charged images, narrative pace, strongly individuated voice and vivid character sketches.
13. I had experimented with a hybrid structure before in *The Mother Workshops* (2004), but that book has more in common with a themed collection or an autobiographical long poem, even though prose segments were included. The concept of workshops and attendant exercises were integral to the meaning.

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