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Creating the Novel: Five Essential Features

Abstract:

This paper considers the novel as an artform and discusses some of the novel-creating qualities that might be useful for teachers or supervisors of the novel to discuss with students.

It breaks novel writing and creation down into five crucial features. Firstly, the fact that novels usually take a number of years to complete means that endurance becomes a defining characteristic of the writer's journey. Secondly, the writer is called upon to address the issue of novelty and find either something *new* to say, or find a *new* form of expression in their fiction. The third aspect pertains to characterisation. Novels are read over days and weeks rather than over hours. Readers experience the characters changing in numerous ways from the start to the finish of a text. The capacity of characters to change within becomes a significant feature of the novel craft. And the fourth consideration pertains to structure. A novel should aim to provide the reader with a logical system of interconnections in order for a narrative to be internally cohesive. However, in order for a novel to avoid being predictable, it may be useful to temporarily conceal or refrain from openly declaring some of these structural components. The withholding of key information in a novel allows the writer to surprise the reader with a timely revelation. In some narratives such a device will produce not just *one* story, but *two or more* stories that the reader can take away with them as their perspective on events is manipulated and guided by the creative writer.

Biographical note:

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Novel writing was introduced as a subject at Canberra College of Advanced Education in the late 1970s and since then it has been taught in Professional Writing and Editing Courses (in the TAFE sector from the 1980s onwards) and now as an undergraduate subject at a number Australian universities, including Melbourne University. In addition many postgraduate creative writing students write novels as the creative component of their MAs and PhDs, and therefore there is a growing need for essays that explain the process of novel creation for writing students. This essay explores some under-appreciated features of novel writing, addressing in particular the formidable scope of the project and how it can be managed. Practical solutions that may be useful for teachers and supervisors are offered. The five features in creating a novel that I will be looking at are: endurance, novelty, the capacity for characters to change within, a logical system of interconnections and the withholding of key information.

1. Endurance

The Melbourne poet Kevin Brophy likens making the artifact of a poem to constructing a table out of wood (Brophy 2003, p171). A lot of crafting is needed to make a poem. It is a machine in words. Both a table and a poem are made to fulfil a need, says Brophy. The table to eat upon, presumably, and the poem to surprise with its meal of words, images, sounds and thoughts.

Comparatively speaking then, you might say that to write a novel would mean building a *whole house* of furniture. But you don't stop there. You need to build the house the furniture is sitting in, and a fence around the house and the streetscape in front of the house and the school down the road and shops and trees and a swimming pool for your characters to indulge their libidinal urges in. Your lead character can't just sit at her square table and drink cups of tea for the rest of the time you are giving her life, a life that will probably amount to weeks and months if not years. When you dream up a whole house full of characters you know you are going to be busy. And believe me, you will be.

When you sit down to write a novel you may be signing your life away for longer than you realise. Few walk away in under two years. Some are still going at it trying to make it hang together after ten. Not necessarily fools either. Some novels do take a long time to perfect. Gail Jones, the West Australian novelist, said at a writer's festival that she has never read a *perfect* novel (Jones 2006). The form might well defy perfection, it's true, yet the other side of this is that the form is baggy enough to absorb faults.

I would wager that the long term effort that goes into writing a novel surpasses that needed to put together an art exhibition or to compose a symphony (Wagner's Ring cycle being the musical exception). Novel creation is the consummate aesthetic adventure. Enter into it at your own risk.

2. Novelty (of course!)

The novel was a *new* literary form in the seventeenth century, and the eighteenth century saw the heyday of the novel, so this makes it quite an antiquated artform now. Filmmaking took over in the twentieth century as the avant-garde means of expression. If you write genre fiction you don't have to worry about being 'original', but even genre fiction requires the novelist, at the very least, to make up their own sentences. Some inventiveness is expected and/or tolerated by publishers and readers.

Most literary novelists feel the compulsion and necessity to live up to the name of the 'novel' and make an original contribution in some way. One doesn't have to invent the 'stream of consciousness' style to break new ground. It can be simply a matter of telling an old story from a new angle.

I write historical novels and so there is in this genre an opportunity to uncover material from the past that throws light on the contemporary world and how we came to be as we are. I think this dialogue with the past is what gives my own writing a claim to novelty. The silences surrounding women's lives were inspiring to me when I was writing my first two novels, both excursions in feminist postmodern revisionism. My current novel continues to pursue the politics of identity loss and formation, this time focusing on the position of the Moors in early seventeenth century Spain. It is what has been ignored or kept quiet about in European history that interests me most.

3. The capacity for characters to change within

This is somewhat different from change happening *to* characters, which is always prevalent in fiction. In short fiction characters react, make choices, decide to retaliate, face the truth or forgive. We don't usually have the opportunity to see the emotional worlds of the characters evolving and changing in short fiction because ten pages is a short space of time. Gradual change is more naturally consistent with real human behaviour though, and can be captured in a longer work.

Of course characters *do* have the capacity for profound change in short stories. One thinks of Hemingway's stories and his ability to show a man and a woman at the crossroads in a relationship, conducting a discussion that bears deeply on them, leaving the reader with the impression that their understanding of themselves and of each other has changed significantly, and perhaps their futures too and the futures of others are held in the balance, as is the case in Hemingway's famous story 'Hills Like White Elephants'.

It is in novels rather than short fiction that psychological exploration finds its deepest and most exacting form of expression. We may feel that we know some characters better in novels than we do people we've been acquainted with for years in real life. As writers we might spend more time fathoming the emotional machinations of a heroine than we would ever devote to examining ourselves or our closest friends. It could be heartbreaking — it probably is, this picture of the writer sitting at her desk, investing in her fictional characters at the expense of an investment in self. We hope that our readers

will get attached to the complex and interesting characters we have taken so long constructing. We hope that our readers will draw sustenance from our novels and will be affected by them; that they might take an appealing character away with them, or at least a memorable image.

Some characters in novels might seem incapable of the kind of emotional growth or changing perspective I am advocating above. For example, Cervantes character Don Quixote is an infirm and inflexible character, stuck fast in his delusional ways. He is not a favourite character of mine because of this. Don Quixote—the character—is so wrapped up in his own hummingbird reality that his interactions with other characters can't alter his essential nature.

And this brings me to my next proposition that is only through interactional *relationships* with other characters that protagonists change in the profound ways that I'm talking about. A novel's success is often attributable to the emotional investments and transactions between characters. In Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, young adults Cam and James get on a boat with their father and sail to the lighthouse ten years after a trip they'd originally planned. The journey they take is more meaningful to the reader because siblings Cam and James, and their father, Mr Ramsay, have absorbed the loss of Mrs Ramsay in the intervening years and carry a memory of her alongside them in the sailboat. Mrs Ramsay is also on board with them, though only in their hearts. Cam and James also carry with them the memory of their childhood desires to go to the lighthouse, though they are different people now, with a modified set of desires and agendas. The trip to the lighthouse at the end of the story bears more emotional weight because the reader has absorbed James' childish disappointment that the first intended trip never happened. Time has passed and the reader has suffered alongside James and Cam.

While I have been discussing change above with regard to significant love relationships, there's probably no need to be so exclusive. Even a scrimmage and scuffle with a stranger on a crowded bus, à la Raymond Queneau in *Exercises in Style*, can be incident enough to alter the course of a personal history (Queneau, 1947).

4. A logical system of interconnections

The fourth aspect to focus on in creating a novel pertains to the intersection of events, incidents and relationships that create plot or storyline. I'm talking about the macro level now, and the way chapters and sections blend into a satisfying whole. A novel should provide the reader with a logical system of interconnections in order for a narrative to be internally cohesive. This doesn't mean that everything that happens should be realistic, consequent and conform to a view of what is possible in life. Bizarre and incongruous things may happen in a novel and at odd times, as they do sometimes in life if they are explainable within the novel's epistemological and structural framework. Can *The Trout Opera* by Matt Condon convince you that the boy Wilfred would be skinning a dead

rainbow trout (learning the art of taxidermy) at the same moment his father falls and is lying dead in the snow? Yes, undoubtedly Condon's novel does. 'How quickly the life drains away,' notes Wilfred's grandfather studying the dead trout (Condon 2007, p.275). Such a poetic alignment of two corpses in back-to-back scenes adds a deepening layer of significance to the loss of the father for the central protagonist, and for the reader too. As young Wilfred respectfully fingers the dead trout, he is also, symbolically laying out his dead father. This distanced connection between the son and father at the moment of death and in its aftermath is true to the spirit of the novel, which is about emotional and physical distancing between loved ones and isolation's dampening yet salvaging effect on the soul. The juxtaposed scenes fit into a novelistic cycle which constantly pulls away from emotional confrontation and physical intimacy. Moreover, Wilfred himself has become synonymous with trouts from the opening pages of the novel when trouts were introduced as the powerful talisman of life and continuity in the Snowy Mountain community, replacing Christian religious symbolism at the Christmas pageant.

Thus the connective link between these two not obviously contingent scenes is cohesive rather than jarring. As a novelist at any stage of development it is important to ask yourself how key events, chapters and scenes are related. If they do not compound the novel's central meaning or reveal aspects of importance about the main protagonists, are they worth retaining?

My Advanced Novel students at NMIT were keen to tell me they found the final chapters of Geraldine Brook's *Year of Wonders* ludicrous and implausible when put alongside the rest of her novel (Brooks 2001). These later sections did not interconnect with the whole. When the main character Anna, a servant girl in a small village in England, suddenly becomes a single mother and heads off pregnant and alone to the Middle East, this plotline doesn't cohere with the other information we have collected up until then. Anna has hitherto been portrayed as prim, obedient and pious. She has no money and little education. She is made strong mettle, yes, but a poor woman of those times would never have considered such a risky and costly venture. The author no doubt wanted Anna to start afresh in a new place. However, the reader's investment in the novel up to then is betrayed by this illogical and farcical development.

The fiction writer can do anything? Perhaps they can start a novel any place they like, but the ending of a novel has to grow out of everything that's come before and has therefore the greatest margin of error. An ending must be reconcilable with the thousand of plotted choices already configured. When the pieces of a narrative fit together in a logical and cohesive fashion we have a believable novel and one of cumulative power, of tonal light and shade, of yin and yang, of slow-releasing emotion and sustaining value.

5. The withholding of key information

In order for a novel constructed via logic to avoid unravelling in a predictable fashion, it may be useful to temporarily conceal or refrain from openly declaring some story threads

or thematic motifs until later on in the sequencing. The author can script in a misleading circumstance — assuming it is also a viable possibility — to put readers off the scent. The withholding of key information in a novel allows the writer to surprise the reader with a timely revelation. In Anne Enright’s superbly constructed novel *The Gathering* — the parts of which fit together like a jigsaw puzzle — an early flashback chapter suggests that the dynamically attracted couple, Ada and Lambert, will become the narrator’s grandparents, then surprises us with the revelation that Ada will choose to marry Lambert’s best friend instead. Ada will choose the man she likes rather than the man who has her measure but whom she doesn’t confidently ‘like’. The narrator suggests that this choice has perhaps been an error of judgement on the orphaned Ada’s part. It leads inexorably to the novel’s central tragedy by a causal connection of calamities, all reasonably and convincingly dramatised in *The Gathering*, the title connoting a gathering of information and storylines, as well as referring to the specific family gathering more obviously intended.

Enright spends two-thirds of the novel slowly circling around a childhood incident that the novel hinges upon thematically. In the opening pages we might hazard a guess at what the incident was. As the novel unfolds we are given clue after clue but ever so subtly so that it is a true ‘withholding of information’ which has the effect of making us continue to wonder what malpractice occurred and who was to blame. When the narrator eventually discloses her secret in full, saying, ‘It is time to put an end to the shifting stories and the waking dreams. It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada’s house, the year that I was eight, and Liam barely nine’ (Enright 2007, p.142), the revelation has a far greater weight because the narrator/author has already knitted us into the lives and histories of the persons involved. We have been exposed to hundreds of character choices and decisions as well as the influence of historical, cultural and sexual circumstances that have made the incident (seem) inevitable, plausible, but also reversible and therefore unnecessary. Another outcome would also have been possible if people had acted differently. Human behaviour is being indicted even if, as Enright implies, destiny is outside our full control.

In other novels, another type of ‘withholding device’ will produce not just *one* story, but *two or more* stories that the reader can take away with them as their perspective on events is manipulated and guided. Consider John Banville’s 2005 novel *The Sea*. Narrator Max spent his childhood seaside holidays with the Grace family, twins Myles and Chloe, and an older girl Rose who appears to be a close relative of the Grace family, or perhaps an adopted child. Banville chooses to keep Rose’s real identity a secret until near the end of the story when she is revealed as the twin’s governess, though we have never seen her playing a carer role with the twins. We also find out near the end, in the framing story in which Max is elderly, that his landlady, Miss Vavasour, is Rose grown old. Banville withholds this information in order to deceive the reader into thinking Miss Vavasour has no immediate connection to the events in the past that Max is telling us about.

Max himself is the victim of a false assumption, thinking Rose was in love with the twins’ father, when she was really in love with the twins’ mother. False assumptions and

the havoc they can wreck are at the novel's thematic core, so Banville's exercises in narratorial withholding cannot just be explained as gratuitous, postmodern surface play.

Never underestimate a reader's love of secrets and the powerful effect of slowly revealing the truth. Realising that Rose is not the character I thought she was alters my prior reading of the story. The novel splits into two, the old tale and new. If Banville had told the story openly, if he had revealed Rose as a governess from the start rather than on p 225, if he had revealed Miss Vavasour to be Rose from the start rather than on p 261, if he had revealed Rose's true love object well before the second last page, it would have still been a good novel, but not half as arresting and fulfilling. Now we have two stories for the price of one, for having invested so much time imagining the first version, the reader can't quickly discard it. We remember our first impressions, even though they have been superseded by more compelling and logically necessary ones. Rose as governess, being older than she at first appears, is able to have a sexual connection to the twins' parents, Mr and Mrs Grace, and they to her. And this complication allows the story to take on a romantic complexity. I'm personally not sure that the emotional entanglements that so brilliantly drive this novel lead inevitably and logically to the novel's tragic climax. I would have preferred a less extreme ending. Novels don't need big bang closure to render them complete.

A film *The Illusionist* (2006), directed by Neil Berger, employs a similar double-story device to great effect, though in the film we are never quite sure which version of events really happened: the initial one in which the heroine dies, or the one in which she cheats destiny. If we can get our readers to go back over images a second time, but see them anew, we may be tricking them, but they will never mind, not in the least, for there is a very human pleasure in imagining alternative outcomes. Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2002), fools and pleasures readers with a romantic ending before revealing the true, tragic — and in this case — more logically probable one, given the circumstances that have already transpired in the narrative. We all know that each of our lives could have been remarkably different if we had made different choices. If we had spoken different lines. If those around us had made different choices. If the rains had fallen on Monday rather than Tuesday. We either get the better of life or life gets the better of us. For the contemporary storyteller, perhaps, novelty lies in leaving your reader with uncertainty.

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