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Omissions and additions: ethics and the epistolary writer.

Abstract:

Contemporary creative epistolary writers can become confused when confronted with ethical issues relating to genre naming such as creative nonfiction; faction; autofiction, the nonfictional novel, ethnographic fiction and true fiction. These hybrid forms often do not require a human research ethics formal clearance, however, these stories must still show strong evidence of ethical interrogation.

During the writing of the epistolary novel, *Hens lay, people lie*, many ethical issues emerged. The main four being: ethical treatment of people, my responsibility to myself as a writer, the contract between writer and reader and my responsibility to the novel. The connection between the ethical issues of women's writing and informal, creative forms of writing, such as diaries, journals and personal letters, 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 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/USA context 1975-2010.

Keywords:

Epistolarity–autoethnography–autobiography–biography

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Ethical questions imply a certain moral obligation to care about the responsibilities we have to others. I believe most writers have feelings of empathy when writing their stories and that the ancient Sanskrit principles of respect and care for the self and others apply to writing and research (Shusterman 2002).

Initially I puzzled over how to tell the story of my thirty-five year, letter-based pen-friendship with an older American poet. It was auto/biography, by which I mean both biography and autobiography, not only because it wove my words with those of my pen-friend (Mickey), but also because the lives of pen-friends are inextricably intertwined (Binhammer 1993: 107). I wrestled daily with the ethical implications and possible impact of my literary choices. My ethical responsibilities were to people, to the contract between writer and reader, to myself as a writer, and to the work. Writing the novel *Hens lay, people lie* (Whitting, forthcoming), I used the epistolary form and mediated text. This hybrid genre straddling fact and fiction provided me with an emotional and ethical safe writing space. I needed this safe space to deal with problematic ethical issues discussed in this paper and to write the story.

Margaretta Jolly (2008) in her book, *In love and struggle*, sets out the theory that behind women's writing is a persistent ideal of ethic of care. She says that:

[i]n contrast to an ethic of justice, which hopes to treat everyone the same through a principle of human equality, an ethic of care is premised on the idea that 'no one shall be hurt,' in the face of the obvious differences between people and their needs (Jolly 2008: 87).

The 'ethic of justice', at least since the eighteenth century, rests on the belief that the best way to care for people is to respect their rights, to be fair, and rectify wrongs (Friedman 1995: 71). In the 1970s and 1980s, the same period that saw the rise of feminine creative epistolarity and produced auto/biographical discussion, the 'ethic of care' was formalised by Carol Gilligan (1982) and Sara Ruddock (1980).

This 'ethic of care' is premised on the belief that the world, and its people, are maintained and repaired through the nurturing of relationships (Jolly 2008). Gilligan claims that 'the logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships which contrast with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach' (Gilligan 1982: 73). A reluctance to judge and to hurt resonated with me, and is the core of my ethics in relationship to writing *Hens lay people lie* and is the basis of the relationship between my pen-friend and myself. However, I believe that it is necessary that all people, in order to be fully human, possess both an ethic of justice and Gilligan's ethic of care (Toronto 1993).

There are many ethical challenges for the writer who chooses to write from life and I was always mindful that I was using extracts of my pen-friend's letters and her life story. This initially held back the writing of the novel. I wanted to protect people I knew. I was not a journalist, some of whom exploit others for their stories. Nevertheless, it was also my story and by concentrating on ethics to people the artefact was in danger of becoming a hagiography to a pen-friend. I was not being ethical to the story (Bloom 2003). To honour the life experiences of two women pen-friends I had to unpack what being fair and ethical to the story meant.

How much factual information could I, would I reveal? For the sake of the story, could I leave out people, characters or historical events? How balanced were the protagonists points of view? Was there a danger of imposing myself and my perceptions of other people? My solution to these concerns was to find a way of writing that enabled me to address not only the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach, but also an ethic of care where my writing did no harm (Jolly 2008: 83):

The decision to use fictional techniques and devices in service of the narrative was liberating. The fictional constructional techniques in mediating texts of different tenses, blanks, cuts in the text, metaphor, different points of view and voices for composite, fictional characters enabled me to 'fictionalise' identities, invent entirely new letters, or adapt the original ones where plot required it (Goldsmith 1989). This changed the artefact from an auto/biography of our friendship to a boarder hybrid novel focused on women's lived experience. My ethical responsibility as a writer was now first and foremost to the story (Bloom 2003).

It is easy to become confused when confronted with what Laurel Richardson terms 'oxymoronic genre naming such as creative nonfiction; faction; autofiction; the nonfictional novel; ethnographic fiction and true fiction' (Richardson 2000). These hybrid forms often do not require any university's ethics committee's formal clearance (Forché 2001). Stories such as *Hen's lay, people lie* must show strong evidence of ethical interrogation. I wrestled daily with the ethical implications associated with this story, constantly evaluating my responsibility as a writer.

I focused not only on the ethical treatment of the individual subject of the research/narrative, but also on the ethical implications between myself, my readers and my story. Paul Carter (2010) observes that ethical considerations need to be viewed within the context that in relation to one another humans are social beings; therefore, ethics is socially prescribed and is embedded and embodied. Our culture, life experiences and background all impact on how and what we write. By reflexively challenging our values and engaging in ethical analyses sound ethical writing practice is established (Bolton 2010).

Women in Western society are expected to repress their own needs to those of the dominant group (Campbell 1973). Often occupying the carer/nurturer role thereby forgetting they have an obligation to nurture themselves or their talent. Lee Gilligan argues that women need to learn how to care for themselves as part of their moral development and to disrupt the conventional feminine equation of 'goodness with self sacrifice [sic]' (Gilligan 1982: 73). Therefore, according to Gilligan, ethics is a gender-based issue. She argues that men are more inclined to follow an ethics of justice which hopes to treat everyone the same through a principle of human equality. Women logically follow the ethic of care position. Margareta Jolly and Lawrence Kohlberg both think that women position themselves ethically in relation to their felt responsibility towards human needs, while most men weigh up their 'rights' and responsibilities in the abstract (Kohlberg 1966; Jolly 2008).

By investigating 'the age old split between thinking and feeling, justice and mercy that underlies many of the clichés and stereotypes concerning the differences between the sexes', Gilligan quotes Chodorow's argument that, 'girls emerge from early socialisation with a basis for empathy built in to their primary definition of self' (Chodorow 1999 :8). Gilligan claims that '[t]he logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which

contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach' (Gilligan 1982: 73). To me, as a woman writer, I have a primary ethical responsibility to myself.

One of the first ethical issues I addressed when writing *Hens lay, people lie* was my responsibility to honour the contract that connects the writer and the reader. Readers expect the writer to deliver what they have led the reader to believe they are delivering. Writers, in turn, trust their readers to understand and respect their writing even though readers may not share values (Gutkind 2001). Therefore, if the writer states that the story is nonfiction, there is an expectation on the part of the reader that the story will be both true and accurate. If the story is presented as a hybrid genre such as auto/bio-informed fiction, the reader assumes that the story is based on facts, but the techniques of fiction will be used. Transparency creates a relationship of trust between the writer and the reader (Gutkind 2001).

One recent example of the reader writer contract is Lionel Shriver's (2004) epistolary novel *We must talk about Kevin*. The bond between writer and reader is sustained. The reader is aware upfront that the story is told from the mother's perspective through the husband. The reader is firmly positioned between the mother and the dead husband, and because the reader is not told until the end of the novel that he has been murdered by the child, the husband is an active presence in the room. Therefore the reader assumes that he's the person the mother is writing to and the integrity of the story is maintained.

Nessa O'Mahony (2009), who outlines very clearly her position regarding her epistolary verse novel in her declaration page in *In sight of home*, states that:

[w]hat follows is a work of fiction. Although I have used extracts from the Butler letters where necessary, I have invented entirely new letters, or adapted the original ones, where plot required it. I have created a cast of fictional characters whose lives, contemporary and historic intertwine with those of the Butler family. Some of the events described in these pages did happen, others are pure invention, others still a blend of both. I will leave it to the discerning reader to decide which is which.

O'Mahony's declaration gave me the freedom as the writer of an epistolary novel a space to investigate this multi-faceted approach thereby ensuring internal fairness, narrative logic and authorial ethics to the text. If the premise remains that nonfiction is in the facts, creative nonfiction is in the telling (Hecq 2011). Academic, Lynn Bloom emphasises that to be credible, the writer of creative nonfiction has to play fair (Bloom 2003).

Bloom's conception of 'playing fair' allowed me to take certain liberties with the truth while staying loyal to a possible 'truth'. My 'truthfulness' defines my story through both literal truthfulness and a concept of relative truth as described by Gerard (1996) as a larger Truth to be told in a clear voice, with grace and out of a passionate curiosity about the world. This permits a deeper relationship of trust, and believability between writer and reader. I see this as my responsibility as a scholar to my artefact.

Where living people are concerned there can be virtue in protecting the innocent, the vulnerable, the voiceless, private people who would be destroyed if their inmost secrets were betrayed. This is an ethical issue that I suspect all scrupulous writers of creative nonfiction and biographies of living people contend with routinely-and resolve differentially, on a case-by-case basis (Bloom 2003 :279).

My ethical dilemma throughout my writing was grappling with the feeling that I was using people and their stories for my own ends. Can reconstructing these narratives damage a treasured memory? How much should I or do I need to reveal?

Questions of ethics and exposure arise all the time in writing. Writers hold the trust and sensitivities of many people in their hands as they craft a work of art from their imagination and from the lived experiences of people around them. Were I to be the subject of a hybridised story I would like to have the same respect applied to my life (Hansen 2012). In the process of creating a fiction which aims also to be true to the identities of the 'real-life' protagonists involved, there is a potential clash between the imperative for telling the truth and betrayal.

Meme McDonald (2002), when writing her story *Flytrap* based on a funny incident between her daughter and herself, called her daughter's stepdad her dad for the sake of the story. When her daughter read the final draft, she was deeply offended. To McDonald, for the sake of simplicity in the story, a simple name change was unimportant. However, it was of great importance to her daughter. A compromise was made by using humour. The character became One Two Three, Stepdad Gee.

If I was to be true to my own memories, I would have to write about friendship both from Mickey's and my perspective. Therefore, I would write '*ourstory*' (Gadamer 1976, Ulmer 1989). To write *ourstory* meant collaboration and this can be fraught with danger. Both parties have their own perception, own memories of the relationship. When I first put pen to paper, Mickey and I had trouble collaborating. Our conflicting views ranged from deletions and additions to form and style. The story began as auto/biographical nonfiction, but as a writer I soon became aware of the limitations of the auto/biographical genre, such as gaps to fill and the amalgamation and shortening of our letters. Yet for Mickey, her priority for the developing story was the notion of fact and truthfulness. Being steeped in the scientific community of her husband's profession as a herpetologist, it never occurred to Mickey that such a notion as truth was transient and variable.

The shift between biography to creative epistolarity invariably leads to the question of story ownership. Is it the motivating character, the author or the reader? Ethics is also about sensitivities; telling a story has an effect on those people who see their lives intimately connected to the story, even though many of the incidents described had never happened to them. There can only be one owner. There can never be one story. Text mediated between writer and reader takes on a life of its own.

Eventually I asked Mickey's permission to use a hybridity of auto/biographically informed fiction. Mickey, a dedicated member of her local county writing group, agreed that this was the best way forward to fill any gaps. I was relieved that I could use my imagination and the techniques of fiction to craft this story.

In 2009, after attending the Qualitative Inquiry Conference in Illinois USA, to hear autoethnographers such as Caroline Ellis (2004) Laurel Richardson (2005) and the 'qualitative research guru', Norman Denzin (2009), I took a four-day field trip to Arizona to revisit my pen-friend. The hope was to share my research and writing with her. Much to my surprise she was no longer interested. 'You're writing fiction now aren't you?' she said. When I answered, 'Yes', she replied, 'Good', and started talking about the weather. I wondered if her

lack of interest was age related, or that she didn't want to revisit the past. Or did she trust me to do justice to the story?

The laptop remained unopened. Later, I realised that mediated text gave me a safe space to write, but had a distancing affect on her. She had given permission to fictionalise the story of our pen friendship, but she no longer felt attached to the story. My initial reaction was shock followed by sadness because one of my main joys in writing this story was to record this interesting woman's life.

However, Mickey's withdrawal was also a relief. I had agonised over behaving ethically towards her, often torn between my respect for her and my desire for the emotional and writerly freedom to tell the story as it was unfolding. Mickey's permission for me to claim it, make it my own and tell it from my perspective was liberating. However, there was still a danger of the story bordering on a hagiography, or idealising the story, as is often the case when the writer and the subject of novels are close friends (Jones 1981). It is often difficult to make ethical decisions when faced with competing concerns. Some of the ethical decisions I made may be questioned by others and in retrospect regretted by myself.

Eight months after my return to Australia, my writing and research stalled when I was informed that my friend, and the protagonist of the novel, had died. Did she deserve special treatment because she couldn't submit alternative versions and denials? Through research and journaling I discovered that I owed myself an ethical position as writer/researcher first and foremost.

There is a need to protect the self when writing life stories, especially emotionally painful narratives. It can be personally damaging to relive and revisit grief, and there is the potential danger of becoming re-traumatised (Douglas & Vogler 2003; Miller & Tougaw 2002). The ethical component of my writing from mourning was to write the story in a way that did not do damage to myself; therefore, I moved further into fiction.

To write the story meant embracing a belief in myself as a writer and allow myself to write from the heart. This gave me the freedom to be true to the story and to fully use my imagination for the sake of the story. I had the freedom to play. To highlight and advance the theme of mother/daughter relationships, I could now give the character based on myself the daughter I never had.

Writing in a hybrid genre, between fact and fiction, allowed a safe emotional and creative space where I could wrestle daily with the craft of writing an auto/biographically informed novel while constantly evaluating my responsibility as a writer. For me, the process of writing is to be engaged in an ongoing interplay of fact and fiction, of questions of ethics and of self-expression, of striving for integrity as an artist and a human.

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