

## Gay Lynch

### New Preface: Historical Fiction Writers Explicate Their Practice

#### Abstract:

Unstable notions of fiction and historicity demand that writers of historical fiction self-consciously posture themselves in the public culture in which they solicit and sell, and yet they are castigated by historians, reviewers and public intellectuals. Offering an essay, usually dressed as acknowledgments, but occasionally as author's notes or afterwords, which usurps the prefatory function, is commonplace. Historical fiction writers use the preface to pre-empt criticism relating to their historical and experiential research. This is not new.

Gerard Genette (*Paratexts (Seuils): Thresholds of Interpretation*)'s examination of the preface as paratext provides this paper with useful models for exploring original and later prefatory disclaimers, declarations and admissions.

Recent *TEXT* articles suggest that exegeses accompanying most Australian creative writing PhDs link closely with traditional prefaces, their shared functions being to establish the cultural context of the creative works. This paper takes up Jeri Kroll and Nigel Krauth's analogy for the purpose of considering Kate Grenville's *Searching for the Secret River* (2006) as preface.

#### Keywords:

Kate Grenville – *Searching for the Secret River* – Historical Fiction – Preface – Exegesis

#### Biographical Note:

After completing her Masters of Creative Writing at Adelaide University, Gay Lynch commenced a doctorate at Flinders University, to research an Irish settler novel. She has a particular interest in apocryphal stories and myth-making.

Published papers can be read in *TEXT*: [www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/](http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/) (2004, 2006).

*Intent* a young-adult novel was shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival of Arts/Wakefield Press Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2002. *Cleanskin*, an adult novel, was published by Wakefield Press in 2006.

During her Ph D candidature at Flinders University she has taught students in English, Creative Writing, and Fiction for Young Readers. She presently tutors and lectures in Creative Writing.

## Introduction

Unstable notions of historicity demand that historical fiction writers posit themselves in a cultural context. Offering an essay, usually dressed as acknowledgments, but occasionally as author's notes or afterwords, which usurps the prefatory function, has become accepted practice. Even as nineteenth-century prefaces morph into twenty-first-century acknowledgments, this paper will follow French theorist Gerard Genette's lead in collectively referring to all these essays, as preface. A preface helps to set the narrative against broader literary and cultural issues.

Genette's work on paratexts provides useful models for examining the prefaces, original or delayed, of literary historical fiction. The reading of both texts may be interrupted by epi-texts, which he defines as reviews, interviews, correspondence and diaries, anything outside the bound volume. Perhaps now he would include creative writing exegeses.

Genette suggests modern prefaces concern themselves predominantly with 'themes of how': the genesis of the novel, including sources; the choice of public; comments upon the title; contracts of fiction; statements of intent; genre definitions and various dodges (Genette 1997: 209). However, he claims 'the most important function of the original preface ... is to provide the author's interpretation of the text ... his statement of intent' (Genette 1997: 221). Nigel Krauth (2002) and Jeri Kroll (2004) have already suggested that exegeses accompanying creative writing theses resemble traditional prefaces; their primary function is to establish the creative work's cultural and literary context. Their papers focus, in different ways, on how literary prefaces connect with exegeses, but neither discusses Genette.

This paper takes up Krauth's and Kroll's analogy, for the purpose of considering Kate Grenville's *Searching for the Secret River* (2006) (*SFSR*) as a kind of preface. *SFSR* functions in at least three ways: as memoir, as writers' tool kit and as extended preface. Genette's prefatory themes provide a useful model for analysis. In an early review Delia Falconer argues that Grenville's text 'falls somewhere between an extended festival paper ... and an in-depth discussion of the drafting process', and notes that Grenville submitted an earlier version as a doctoral thesis (2006: 21).

An article on Grenville's website describes the book as memoir including 'record of the research, and a journal of the evolution of the book from non-fiction to novel,' and further, as a 'how to' book 'already being eagerly read by book groups, students and writers looking for guidance' (Grenville 2007a). Falconer describes the book as 'a stroke of marketing genius on the part of publisher Text that may spark a whole new genre' (2006: 21). Will the number of new and established writers involved in postgraduate creative writing degrees lead to a reworking and re-branding of exegeses accompanying their experiential research, either as original or later preface? *SFSR* and *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady* (2007) by Sue Woolfe may be the precursors of exegeses accompanying novels into a multi-segmented market.

Setting Genette's prefatory functions against *SFSR* allows this paper to engage with Grenville's transformation of history into fiction, and at the same time, exposes common points of tension between historical fiction writers and historians.

### **Unstable Notions of Historicity**

Historians would be better placed to study King Canute than attempt to prevent fiction writers working in their field. Nevertheless, who can deny the anger they feel about their conflicted place in Australia's cultural identity production? In 2006, public intellectual and historian, Inga Clendinnen claimed that 'novelists have been doing their best to bump historians off the track' (2006a: 16). She is on the lookout for historical fiction writers who show attitude ('exuberant confidence', 'insouciant exploitation of fragments of the past'), lack historical professionalism (the collapsing of time, opportunistic transpositions, and elisions) and show off their subjective petticoats ('I'm sorry Kate Grenville feels misrepresented') (Clendinnen 2007a: 73-77; 2006a: 16). Have the battered protagonists in the history wars tried to throw off the cheerful trailing historical fiction writers doing business in their own way?

Historical fiction is commonly defined as that in which real-life historical figures appear, or have been represented diaphanously cloaked, along with depictions of historical consciousness. Marxist historian George Lukacs takes this further reminding us that the groundbreaking historical novels of Sir Walter Scott 'portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces' (Lukacs 1937: 34). Here lies the rub. At the close of a 2007 Sydney Writers' Festival panel ('Making a Fiction of History') Clendinnen concedes 'fictional truths' but her consistent message might be: stay behind your lines and you won't get hurt.

### **Historical Fiction Writers Have Been Under Fire Before**

In an earlier paper I used Gerard Genette's model to compare the prefaces of forty recent Australian literary historical fiction novels with several nineteenth-century novels, showing that there is nothing new about using the preface to make pre-emptive strikes against imagined criticism (Lynch 2007). Take two examples from my research for an Irish settler novel:

The prevailing taste of the public for anecdote has been censured by critics who aspire to the character of superior wisdom ... of the numbers who study, or at least who read history, how few derive any advantage from their labours. (Edgworth 1800: Allographic Preface)

I have endeavoured to wound as few susceptibilities and tread on as few toes as possible; the time has not yet arrived in the life of Australia when the historian or novelist can write with an untrammelled pen. (Newland 1893: Preface)

Historical fiction writers have always made things up for the amusement and edification of a diverse range of clients: family and friends, casual and critical readers, historians and other custodians of national culture, mentors and examiners. Their tone can be confiding, rueful, playful or authoritative. They may presume that anticipating pleasure, the common reader sees the preface as a mark of faith, and doesn't care overmuch about the genesis of the novel. A preface may target some readers and

subtly deter others. It can be a discursive document, an attempt at mediation, or open fire on a hostile public. It can be published after the main text.

### Delayed Preface

Briefly consider *SFSR* as delayed preface. Genette lists criteria for a delayed preface as: response to critics; autobiography or memoir; a record of an author's likes and tastes; the citing of previous published works; and allographic praise (this author is a genius). Traditionally, delayed prefaces precede new editions of canonical works, often published posthumously. *SFSR* isn't a comfortable fit.

If Grenville's book is a response to critics, it is a mute anticipation, lacking the earnest distress of her later responses to Clendinnen's criticism. At the time of writing the novel and, perhaps, its companion text in an earlier guise as exegesis, she had no idea that *The Secret River* (2005) (*SR*) would be so successful, or that it will attract so much public interest and debate. Its semi diary-format (May in Sydney..., p. 10; I took the train the following day... p. 40; My time in London... p. 66; At the end of 1968..., p. 143) lends most to memoir. It cannot be allographic. *SFSR* has, however, many of the elements of Genette's traditional preface including its ...

### Declaration of Fiction and its Genesis

*SR* did not begin as a fiction project, as Grenville explains: 'I thought there might be a non-fiction book of some kind in the material – perhaps something like a biography of Wiseman and a portrait of his times. I didn't know what, if anything, I'd find, or whether there would be enough interest for a book' (2006: 14). A dearth of primary resources and the need for 'more elbow room,' provide the catalyst for her shift to fiction.

Prefaces generally begin with declarations, which Genette calls 'contracts of fiction' making transparent the engagement between reader and writer and 'professing the work's fictiveness' (Genette 1997: 215). If the fiction has developed from real events or people, the preface usually quickly makes this known. The declarative statement will be enough to keep the critical reader from coming too close to the process, yet offers the sympathetic reader complicity in the enjoyment of an illusion of truth.

Grenville also uses her 'actual' preface (acknowledgments) to *The Secret River* to make her declaration about its fictiveness:

One of my ancestors gave me the basis for certain details in the early life of William Thornhill, and other characters share some qualities with historical figures. All the people within these pages, however, are works of fiction.

*SFSR* clearly explicates the genesis of the *SR* and Grenville's adaptations of her material. The book is divided into three sections. Chapters in the first section work in a roughly chronological way, with the usual back and forth involved in history, as she describes the researching of a fragment of family history, its harnessing to her passion for Aboriginal Reconciliation, and the eventual development of the narrative of *The*

*Secret River*. The second section begins with some graphic organising and the beginning of the writing, the third wrestles with plot, voice and the drafting process.

Grenville's initial inspiration was an oral family tale, apocryphal perhaps, about her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman. The story had been passed down through the generations, and her mother 'always used exactly the same phrases each time she told it...' (2006: 17). Wiseman might have killed his first wife by throwing her down the stairs. If Grenville is keen to establish the genesis of her story, it is to this fact she returns. It is 'the best bit of the story... A dramatic death in the family ... the idea of a ghost ... and most uncomfortable, a murderer for a great-great, great grandfather ...' (2006: 6). Initially, at least, it is this drama rather than the dull primary documents she finds, which capture Grenville's imagination: 'all those petitions and letters about importing this, that and the other weren't especially dramatic' (2006: 81). This episode still remains in her first draft (2006: 177, 181).

Grenville discovers some 'actual' historical documents: Solomon Wiseman's letters, including one in a 'grovelling tone' to his brother-in-law, 'straining after the grand phrase' and with 'elaborate strings of sentences'. She dislikes him: awkward, if he is to be her subject. How will readers engage with her protagonist, if she cannot? After reading more letters she becomes resigned to fictionalising him. 'I was starting to get a feel for him. Irascible, defensive, unyielding,' and 'Wiseman swam in and out of focus, now a good man, now a bad one. Now an innocent man unjustly accused, now a scoundrel' (2006: 87, 88).

And Grenville acknowledges this tension. While part of her fears the Wiseman story is true and that her ancestor is a bastard, another side of her wishes to engage with him, understand him. As a novelist she will take him on, unwittingly enlarging the reader's sympathy for him; and at the same time the people he betrays, his wife, dead at the bottom of the stairs, and the Aboriginal people he evicts and later murders.

In the way of most historical novelists, Grenville's attitude to history is entangled with her instinct for making art. Her preoccupation with using a fragment from the past to create a narrative drives the research of her novel: 'my ship was anchored to the past by ropes of story' (2006: 17). She scours Sydney records for 'the slightest hint that Jane Wiseman's illness might have lingered because she was pushed downstairs by her husband ... some tiny thread to start tugging on'. Alas 'no clues'. 'I found myself leaping to fill in the blanks,' she confides, and 'I had to remind myself that, although this was a good story, that's all it was: a story I'd made up out of almost nothing' (2006: 81-82).

It is well into chapter two before she relates the story of the 2000 Reconciliation Walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge. I do not say this in a critical way, for the production of a novel is not unlike theatre; once done, the conscious and subconscious research, rehearsal and performance have a way of shifting in the artist's mind. This paper argues that historical fiction writing has always been dialogic, public and reproductive.

Like many artists, Grenville experiences a moment of epiphany; during the reconciliation walk she makes eye-contact with an Indigenous woman and shares 'one of those moments of intensity ... we smiled, held each other's gaze, until it sent a

sudden blade of cold into my warm inner glow' (2006:13). Immediately, she knows that what she is doing on the bridge on a Saturday is inextricably connected, to what she is doing with her ancestor, in her creative work. 'What I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history,' she claims (2006: 13). Her novel is set on the Hawkesbury, north of Sydney. Perhaps she recognises the shoals lying ahead but, like her ancestor, she underestimates them.

Grenville regards the building of historical character as a creative enactment, a trick, rather than a definitive impersonation. She is writing fiction. The difficulty of representing real-life characters in fiction is exhaustively discussed in prefaces. Emily Sutherland reminds us that historical figures in novels own a 'fictional identity' (2007). In each section Grenville's characters, mainly Wiseman and his Indigenous neighbours, refuse to stay put and roam at will between the chapters. This is not necessarily a problem, merely allowing the reader a peep-hole view of the writer grappling with her task, as she tries to handle its lumpy shifting shape, listens to clamouring voices at the window, hoping to ignore them long enough, to pull off her creative act. Is there something disingenuous about the way she does it?

It is here that *SFSR* and *SR* attract criticism relating to Grenville's fidelity to historical accounts, her portrayal of historical consciousness, and her analysis of her process. On this issue she takes up one of Genette's traditional dodges: 'uselessness', in regard to the challenge of dealing with Indigenous history. 'I'd never known about any of this. Even worse, I'd never thought to ask' (2006: 120).

Does such self-reflection expose any more than Grenville's muscular leap-frogging, round and round in a tight circle, over eidetic and experiential research, and primary documents, in her pursuit of fictional truth? 'On the one hand, I was shameless in rifling through research for anything I could use, wrenching it out of its place and adapting it for my own purposes,' she admits, but on the other, 'I was trying to be faithful to the shape of the historical record, and the meaning of all those events that historians had written about. What I was writing wasn't real, but it was as true as I could make it' (2006: 191). Despite her uncomfortable position as a privileged white woman, beneficiary of frontier violence, somehow complicit, her moral imagination and her sharpening commitment to reconciliation drive her.

Declarations about fiction hopelessly intertwine themselves with Genette's next function.

### **Genre Definition**

Genre links closely with Genette's contract of fiction; the lines between fact, fiction, life writing, imaginative biography, ficto-criticism and fictionalised memoirs have always blurred; the identity of their subject/authors as complicated as those in Genette's preface schema (permutations and combinations of fictional, allographic, apocryphal, authentic, fictive and actorial) (Genette 1997: 237).

Historical fiction conventions suggest that scholarship should be lightly worn. All fiction needs first to be engaging. Good intentions and research questions change, it seems, as art takes over. But if the greatest fear of fiction writers is to be thought

unscholarly, the preface can provide an elegant rebuttal: ‘I meant to do it – depart from the facts’; or simply a doorstep stakeout, another dodge: ‘buyers beware the consciousness of fiction’. *SR* is fiction; *SFSR* is not. Neither of these two books contains a bibliography. Sniffing out her story, Grenville reads like many writers, as if following tracks or scats: ‘one book led to another ... academic books, anthropological, local histories’ (2006: 127). She also uses the free association of images common in dreams, or films, believing the most important artefact to be the finished book. The power and lyricism of her creative writing is well attested.

Consider these small capsules embedded in her nonfiction: ‘The bush was a great sighing lung’; and, ‘this was an empty place – but empty the way a room was when the people had that minute walked out of it’ (2006: 138, 139).

*Searching for the Secret River* outlines Grenville’s research by praxis, her way of furnishing *SR* with everyday historical detail. She makes lamps and studies tools, and she sees landscape in an eidetic way, camping alone on the banks of the Hawkesbury, handling stones and discovering grinding grooves. Throughout the narrative she makes reference to the delicate negotiations she makes with her real-life and fictional characters. Part three grapples with her effort to get up close and personal with the physical presence of her Indigenous characters: should they speak, how did they walk, how authentic should their dialogue be ... and so on?

Grenville does not discuss the ‘unreliability’ of some historical documents, and the confounding lack of agreement between historians on some issues, but more frequently the frustrating lack of evidence pertinent to her family quest. After an abortive search in the Public Record Office in Kew for petitions lodged on behalf of Wiseman, she is moved by the heartbreaking letter of a stranger condemned to hanging, to his wife, and she vows to use the details to furnish her own narrative.

While Clendinnen might remember citing ‘Novalis himself’ and that ‘Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history’ (*Agamemnon’s Kiss: Selected Essays* 2006: 209), she might also consider the acquisition of details of this man’s life ‘opportunistic transposition’ (2006a: 16). It is not immediately certain whether Grenville will substitute WB’s details for Wiseman’s. Her aim, later stated, is for *SFSR* to make the process transparent (2007b: 71). But it is clear she believes that historical fiction writers take liberties with dates and times and details imperative to the framing and mechanics of their plots. This is a sticking point for historian readers and leads nicely on to Genette’s idea that ...

### **Choice of Audience is Commonly Found in Prefaces**

Does Grenville have a particular reader in mind? *SFSR* is not written in academic language, and makes no direct reference to cultural theorists. Is this inclusive practice or an attempt to subvert direct engagement with those objectified in her chapter headings? Her tone is frequently light, self-deprecating: ‘I was good at the nuts and bolts of the Mitchell now. I had a special dollar coin for the lockers ... I knew the best spot on the front steps to sit for lunch’ (2006: 110); ‘Back on the track I realised I’d been holding my breath. Silly’ (2006: 136-37); ‘This was what Mum called an eye

opener' (2006: 129). 'At times,' suggests Falconer, 'she seems so anxious not to sound highfalutin' or to assume that her audience – which has presumably come to this book after reading her novel – has any knowledge of Australia's past, that the book's tone can feel remedial' (2006: 21).

If it is true that *SFSR* has been adapted from Grenville's doctoral exegesis, how much has the language changed from academic discourse to that more suited to a literary fiction reading public? It becomes apparent at a recent colloquium for Higher Education Creative Writing schools that exegetical expectations can be as widely disparate as the geographical locations of their host campuses: some privileging reflection on the artful journey; others underpinned by theory aligned with scientific thesis models ('Adelaide: Unconventional: Inaugural Colloquium for Creative Writing Students' 2007).

It would be unfair to presume that the 'smell of academia' has been removed from Grenville's thesis, either in its language, structure or scope, while postgraduate exegeses accompanying creative pieces show so much diversity. Expectations of the creative component of Creative Writing PhDs can be similarly diverse, some universities regarding the novel as a practice for the wider world, others a complex draft, to be pared down later for the trade market.

While it is likely that Grenville diarised, in a habitual or a deliberate way, her synthesis of private quest and experiential art, it seems clear enough by the speed of the release of *SFSR* that Text either planned the second book from the beginning, or swiftly made the decision to capitalise on her growing media profile. Grenville confirms this: 'So, concurrently with the novel, I worked on that second book, which has now been published: *SFSR*' (2007b: 72).

Krauth suggests that 'the prefatory voice is likely to be the voice of the author in a range of disguises' (2002). Is it simply a matter of readers' comfort level, some going along with Grenville for the performance, and finding points of clarity, others recoiling from apparent reductionism? The book gives no indication of her intended audience. Is its purpose to sell more of one book or the other?

The adroit image of a war as headache may offer the inexperienced history reader some penetration of the frontier issue. 'Aboriginal people attacked settlers; settlers and soldiers attacked back. Not every day, not every week. But on and off, like a headache' (2006: 113). In a disarming way, Grenville aligns herself with an innocent reader: 'No one told me about this kind of violence on the Hawkesbury' (2006: 116). Analysing the examined thesis might reveal radical or minor changes; that task is beyond the scope of this paper. What dangers lay in revisionist editing, telescoping research already completed, for a different audience?

Who is *SFSR*'s target audience? Some of the chapter titles are set in place. Others address particular stakeholders in cultural history: The Society of Genealogists, Historians, Aboriginal Voices and The First Readers. Yet she does not directly address them, only reminds the reader that they are present, looking over her shoulder, perhaps, while she imagines the choices her ancestors made, and whether she might have done the same.

*The Secret River* is much lauded. Published in 2005, it won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (2006), two NSW Premier's Literary Awards (2006) and was shortlisted for the Mann Booker Prize (2006). It arrived in the thick of a street fight about history. It would be remiss not to refer to the smoke that enveloped her when called to account for her imaginative take on a frontier massacre. Her reference, on radio, to the history wars, suggesting that a 'novelist can stand up on a stepladder and look down at this', inflamed debate about historical fiction writing (Koval 2005). Her four-page dedicated chapter in which she indirectly speaks (third person, past tense) to historians is reasonable in tone, conciliatory, deferential even: 'The historians quoted document after document ... they were a revelation'; and 'The historians drew a complex, nuanced pictures of those times' (2006: 123, 125, 125). Anthropologists don't fare so well (not even a chapter of their own, merely a short paragraph in *Genealogists*):

I ploughed through a couple of books by white anthropologists. They seemed obsessed with marriage rules – I read an awful lot about moieties and kin groups. It was like reading about insects or molecules: distant, unhuman. It was a long way from *what it was really like*. (2006: 127; emphasis added)

Perhaps this dismissive summary raises their ire.

Increasingly Australian historians and novelists compete for market share. A flourishing reading culture has thrown up new notions of celebrity embracing producers of culture: historians, as well as novelists. While Grenville ostensibly attends to the enjoyment of the fiction reader, she also attracts the attention of historians who compete for her readers and might prefer that they get their history straight.

Fiction-writing of any kind tends to be commercial. Although the historian knows how hard it is to be published, how difficult it is to make a living, nonfiction lists outweigh their literary counterparts; perhaps during 'war', history comes to the fore. Nevertheless, the traditional privileging of canonical literary fiction at writers' festivals, and Kate Grenville's choice of subject matter, bring her to the attention of historians. Prefaces might suggest that while historians argue in the taxi, historical fiction writers swing their bags on the pavement. Is it a dodge for fiction writers to say that they need to make a living?

It seems Grenville's perceived attitude offends more than her trespass on the historians' patch. While criticism is couched in deferential terms ('Kate Grenville is one of the best of our fiction writers' [Hirst 2006: 11]), it is apparent that some critics and historians consider that Grenville has got above herself. Journalist Stella Clarke quotes Mark McKenna who 'believes, however, that she's out of line: as a novelist she can't help but join conservative politicians in peddling sloppy "comfort history", and she should lay off claims to ascendancy' (Clarke 2006: 8).

The opening of Clendinnen's 'Response to Correspondence', 'I'm sorry Kate Grenville feels misrepresented,' is loaded with irony (2007a: 73). And if there was any doubt about the seriousness of Clendinnen's intent, it could be removed by the first few sentences of a book review in *The Monthly*: 'Lately I have been pursuing novelists [Norman Mailer] who seem to think they are writing near-enough history,

when in fact they are making it up,' she challenges (Clendinnen 2007b: 48). Later in the same article, Clendinnin draws the lines:

Novelists are blessed in being free to explore imagined exemplary subjectivities, as evidence-dependent historians cannot, and by doing so they can expand their readers' understanding of other lives ... I take this penetration beyond the fully knowable to be what Coetzee means by 'poetic truth', and I honour it. Historians are obliged to differentiate at all times between speculation and assertion, and their quarry is an actual and therefore not fully penetrable world.

By necessity this paper condenses the discursive complexities of Grenville and Clendinnen's public engagement. It is difficult to delineate accurately historians' responses in relation to the provocative subtext of *SR*, the fall-out from Grenville's stepladder analogy, and her rationalisation of frontier history, in *SFSR*. Perhaps all of them link with the prefatory function Genette considers most significant, the ...

### **Authorial Statement of Intent**

Some historical fiction writers wish to disrupt master narratives, to perform in gaps and alleyways, to interpolate in voices never heard before. Great historical moments, ends of millennia, for instance, with their failed ideals and new terrors, become imperatives for historical fiction writers and feature in their prefaces. Grenville writes in the wake of a failed attempt at Aboriginal Reconciliation and while attached, if not ingrained – she is an established fiction writer, after all – in a university culture, she represents her Indigenous characters carefully, particularly their point of view. 'I had always known I wasn't going to try to enter the consciousness of the Aboriginal characters,' she says (2006: 193).

She tackles the fraught issue of writing for and about Indigenous people in a dedicated chapter: *Aboriginal Voices*. Her main points relate to invasion and settlement, kinds of knowledge, and redemption. Is she speaking back to postcolonial police, in an oblique way, or to the common reader?

She talks to Indigenous people about their shared ancestral lands and history: 'The story about my ancestors intersected with their stories ... talking to them wasn't research, it was a matter of country.' She admires their grace and generosity, as they tell stories handed down to them, of 'boys thrown into the river to die' and 'yam daisies' (2006: 131). She acknowledges the oversimplification of Australian prejudices about farming and nomadism, the custodianship of stories and knowledge, how they sedge with materialism (2006: 128). And she recognises that she is embedded in her own culture: 'I thought it was part of being human to compete for things of value. Now I saw that it was part of my group's way of being human' (2006: 129).

It is apparent that Grenville wishes to be even handed, to enlarge our sympathies for settler and settled, in her novel and in her addendum. She lists cruelties on both sides. 'Settlers carried guns and used them frequently, often using the ambiguous word "disperse",' she concedes, and also offers, 'settlers speared and burned in their huts' (2006: 122, 123). If Grenville's bipartisanship is a dodge, and her consciousness

process-driven, she does not shirk her ancestral complicity in the violent settlement process: ‘These were my own people,’ she insists (2006: 125).

Contemporary literary conventions for representing Indigenous characters would prefer them minor characters that they should not be exoticised or exploited in vicarious sexual or violent narratives, and that writers should not appropriate their point of view. University ethics committees vet proposals involving Indigenous subjects; collaboration must be evident and transparent, following protocols and guidelines that recognise custodianship and sovereignty. Was the image of the chained Indigenous woman in *SR* discussed, or left to the practitioner? *SRSR* contains no specific deliberations about the depiction of rape and other violence episodes in the novel.

It would be interesting to follow the ‘actual’ chronology of revision, rather than the version published for trade. Why should we want to? Because a preface invites the reader in, and because critics have already come; because Grenville has exposed the vulnerabilities of writers publishing their self-reflections; and perhaps because she has adapted a creative writing exegesis. As writers and examiners of exegeses this knowledge informs our practice.

Let us consider one final dodge. Genette suggests that an apology about length constitutes a common dodge. Grenville makes none. Length has become redundant in much literary fiction, now pared down and spaciously laid out in gift-book format. Only popular fiction has been allowed to put on weight. What does this mean for producers, particularly candidates from Creative Writing schools, of literary historical fiction?

## Conclusions

It is clear that *SFSR*’s publication hinges on the wonderful commercial success of Grenville’s novel. It is fair to assume that a publisher of Michael Heywood’s standing saw the book not only as a potential earner, but as a timely contribution to national conversations about Australian history, and that his editing reflected a wish to invite as many mainstream readers as possible.

It is my conclusion that *SFSR* takes up many of the prefatory functions researched by Genette. The volley of stones pitched at the house of Grenville has been brought about, in the first place, by historians’ reasonable fears and righteous indignation about their place in Australia’s new identity, and in the second place, because of the perceived attitudes of historical fiction writers to historians and history.

Kroll argues that ‘proximity of the creative and the critical makes an exegesis ... both daring and dangerous (2004: 12). Grenville’s trial of fire may bring about new conventions for the intercourse between literary historical fiction writers and historians. Furthermore, university exegeses centred on historical fiction will likely incorporate the synergy generated by Grenville and Clendinnen’s passionate engagement, over important but fraught historical questions.

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