

Penny Hanley

Wild Things: Embracing the Unexpected

Abstract:

This paper will explore the complexities involved in the notion of research being both writing and not writing, and writing being both research and not research. As a graduate student writing a historical novel and exegesis, this concept resonates profoundly with my experience.

When I began work on the creative component of my PhD, a historical novel with the working title: *Wild Women*, I thought that first I would do the research (Australian history, art history, cultural theory and so on) and then I would do the creative writing, in a clear-cut, methodical way. During the course of unexpected events involving a suspended semester and travel to Ireland, and my discovery of a wild enough background for my fictional character, I discovered the riches of the research that is ‘not writing’. In my paper I discuss the serendipitous events and discovery of wild places which trigger thoughts and spark the imagination in ways that cannot be predicted or planned.

This also had ramifications for the notion of writing being both research and not research and I examine this aspect later in the paper.

Key Words:

Creative Writing – Historical Novel – Creative Research – Serendipity – Subconscious

Biographical note:

Penny Hanley has a BA Honours degree in English Literature from ANU and has published book reviews for *The Canberra Times*, as well as film reviews, journalism, and ten short stories in Australian and international journals and a novel, *Full House* (Simon & Schuster, 1993). She is enrolled in a Creative PhD at the University of Canberra comprising the writing of a historical novel (working title, *Wild Women*) and a related exegesis. She has worked in art galleries, in catering, as a deckhand on a yacht and as an artists’ model, as well as a research assistant, editor, tutor and creative writing teacher.

In this paper I am going to explore the notion of research being both writing and not writing, and writing being both research and not research. To some, this concept might seem unwieldy, complicated or at least paradoxical. But, as I'll demonstrate, it is neither unwieldy nor complicated. I cannot deny that it is paradoxical.

As a graduate student writing a historical novel and an exegesis, the paradoxical concept above resonates profoundly with my experience. Demonstrating how requires a brief outline of my project: the aim of researching and writing my creative PhD is to interrogate the lives of an imagined Irish emigrant surrealist painter, her daughter and granddaughter, and their struggle for agency in twentieth century Australia. My idea of a multi-generational novel allows me the scope to explore the impact of historical events on the creative expression and professional status of women artists over time. In both the novel and the exegesis in different ways, I examine questions of inclusion and exclusion in Australian society at different times and notions concerning history in fiction and fiction in history.

My initial thoughts about both the novel and the exegesis were that first I would do the research (initially I took research to be note-taking and summarising) and then I would do the writing (the creative writing and the 'writing-up' of the exegesis) in a clear-cut, methodical manner. My discovery that it was not like that also has ramifications for the notion of writing being both research and not research and I shall examine this aspect later in this paper. For now, I shall begin with research. I began my PhD research for both the exegesis and the novel by consulting books and writing copious notes on them. I summarised, for example, Geoffrey Serle's *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788-1972* (1973) and Helen Topliss's *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900-1940* (1996) for background for the novel and A. S. Byatt's *On Histories and Stories* (2001) and Robert Holton's *Jarring Witnesses* (1994) to discover more about historiography for the exegesis. I read novels and biographies about artists and made notes on them.

In the tendency of humanities PhDs everywhere, every new book raised new questions and pointed me towards other books and each of those raised new questions and pointed towards even more books and each of *those* and so on. After some time the Catch 22 emerged that I needed to chart a direction through too many strands and to delete some of them but how could I see the relevance of the strands until I saw where they all led? In less than a year my bibliography had soared to over 120 titles, which I had either summarised or taken notes from.

These summaries plus the voluminous notes I was taking from the large number of relevant conferences and lectures I was going to at the National Library, the Humanities Research Centre at ANU and the National Gallery, as well as at the University of Canberra, were rapidly filling up the drawers of my filing cabinet with writing. Thus it seemed at that early stage that research was indeed writing, and nothing but writing – given that, at this stage of my project, I was defining writing as note-taking.

Then, in the first of a series of unexpected events that demonstrates the non-writing element of research, I received a job offer I couldn't refuse: paradoxically, that of writing. It would be a small book on some Australian writers whose papers are held in the Manuscripts Room of the National Library of Australia. This project had some relevance for the novel I was writing and I did write notes on relevant historical events and people I came across in the course of that research, but the main benefit of it for my PhD was that it led to a suspension from the PhD for a semester – another paradox.

During the semester off I not only worked on the Library book (as I referred to that project) but also travelled overseas. This was mainly for family reasons but I was also planning to do some research for the background of my PhD novel. I was able to stay away much longer than I would have if I had not had a semester suspension.

My companion and I went to England to see family and then we travelled to Ireland. I had no idea where in that country my first-generation protagonist would have come from. The original inspiration for her had been French. Years ago the *Canberra Times* had asked me to review a biography, *Camille* by Reine-Marie Paris (1988) about Camille Claudel, a 19th century French sculptor who worked for fifteen years with Rodin and then came to a tragic end. I was captivated by her story, which contained many gaps. Addressing the claim that we can't know the past and shouldn't write about it, AS Byatt stated in *On Histories and Stories* that historical people are attractive to novelists *because* they are unknowable. She quotes Novalis: 'Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history' (Byatt 2001: 62). Byatt claims that the absence of information starts the imagination working and that 'there is a new aesthetic energy to be gained from the borderlines of fact and the unknown' (Byatt 2001: 55). Most of Camille Claudel's letters have been destroyed. During her years with Rodin, Camille disappeared for lengthy periods. No one knows where she went. Immediately I wanted to write a novel that filled in those gaps. The notion of filling in historical gaps with stuff imagined – with 'such stuff/ As dreams are made on' (Shakespeare *The Tempest* Act 4, scene 1, lines 156, 157) – is a troubling one, but at that stage, many years ago, I was not concerned with that. The biography I was reviewing was the initial inspiration for asking a series of *What if...?* questions.

What if Camille had had a child during one of those disappearances? (When she returned, she sculpted figures of children that are poignantly beautiful.) *What if* she had got on a ship and migrated as far away from Rodin and her hostile family as possible? *What if* I made her Irish since very few French people migrated to Australia then but plenty Irish did? *What if* I brought the story forward a little to embrace the volatile artistic possibilities of the between-the-wars period? And so on.

This of course brought me a long way from the original inspiration and was the reason I now had an Irish protagonist who migrated to Australia in the 1920s. I have travelled a great deal but I had not been to Ireland before. As shown above, one can do much research from books but I was discovering that research is more than digging in libraries

for answers to reference questions; it is more than note-taking. It is a lengthy process, a unique journey where it is necessary be open to the unexpected, open to something wild.

For my writing there is no substitute for going to the places I am writing about, whether writing fiction or nonfiction. While I did spend some days in Dublin's National Library of Ireland taking notes from books on Irish women artists it was the *non-writing* experiences I had in Ireland that I felt at the time made for the most significant research, because of the way they fired my imagination, as I outline below.

Serendipitous meetings happened in Dublin almost immediately. At the end of our first day in Dublin, we wound up at Maddigan's pub and the first person we sat near with our tumblers of real Guinness was a young woman who was halfway through a glass of white wine while scribbling addresses on postcards fanned out before her on the solid wooden table. With her colouring and bone structure, she could have been a sister or cousin of mine; I pigeonholed her as an Australian, writing postcards home. But from her accent it became clear she was a local, and the postcards were actually invitations. She gave us one, introducing herself as Fionnuala Collins, painter. She invited us to her art exhibition opening in a few days' time, which certainly felt like a good omen for my work. Although Fionnuala's paintings were pretty wild she was not a surrealist and her work was not like my idea of my protagonist's work, however, subsequent talks with her gave me some insights into the mind of an Irish woman painter.

Fionnuala was a hard-working woman, the glass of wine a reward after a long day in the studio, demonstrating a point she made later about earlier Irish women artists, such as Mainie Jellett, who travelled to Paris in the late nineteenth century amidst much parental disapproval and societal accusations of bohemianism, but who in fact led quiet, industrious lives in Paris centred on improving their craft, refining their art, and pursuing the revolutionary modernist art vision in which they fervently believed. It was their artistic ideas that were wild, not their lives. This allowed me to think of my protagonist and her Sydney modernist contemporaries in a different light from that of the 'bohemianism' reports of modernist painters' lives in the newspapers of the time. (Newspapers from the relevant periods provide crucial information and authentic detail for my novel. I am also aware of many books, such as Richard Haese's *Rebels and Precursors*, Jack Lindsay's *The Roaring Twenties* and Bernard Hessling's *Stir This Stew*, on the 'bohemian' lives of certain painters and writers of the time.) This unexpected and inspiring meeting with an Irish artist was my first encounter with research that was not writing.

The National Gallery of Ireland has a stunning collection of modernist Irish painters. As in Australia the period between the wars was exceptionally rich for women artists and I spent many happy hours in the gallery, absorbing this rich variety of innovative art. We would not be in Dublin for long, yet the timing was perfect to hear an illuminating lecture there by another Irish woman in love with art, an art historian, Fiona McLoughlin, on 'The Origins of Modernism in Irish Art'. I gained more from her talk than from all the notes I'd taken from the books in the Library, or so it seemed to me at the time.

My ancestors came from County Clare and County Kerry, in the very west of Ireland. Travelling around there I naturally come upon the group of islands yet further west, the Blasket islands. (The origin of the name is a mystery, although linguistic scholar Robin Flower suggests that the name comes from the Norse word *brasker*, meaning a dangerous place.¹) When we arrived in our hired Fiat at the westernmost point of the Dingle peninsular we tumbled out of the car into what felt like a Force 9 gale. Although it was April and technically spring, it was difficult to shut the car door against the wild gusts of icy wind. Zipping my blue Kathmandu jacket all the way up to my chin and tightening the drawstring of my hood, I looked across three miles of churning grey Atlantic to the Blasket islands. Huge charcoal-coloured clouds rolled low in the sky. I couldn't see any beach over there, just wild black waves thrashing the distant cliffs. There seemed no possible place to moor a boat. Yet there were whitewashed stone houses hugging the eastern hillside of the largest island, the great Blasket, as if sheltering from the harsh westerly winds as they had presumably done for hundreds or thousands of years.

The Blaskets captured my imagination. By asking local people, exploring the museum and by reading I found out everything I could about them. Life on the islands was physically tough and socially isolated. Many people stated that the three miles might have been thirty. As Cole Morton describes in *Hungry for Home* (2000), a small population of hardy people used to live on them, mostly on the Great Blasket, which had only sixty acres of arable land. They cut peat for fuel, grew potatoes and oats and kept hens. They fished from small boats called naomhògs, clubbed seals for their flesh and oil, and later caught lobsters. In the past they had done well out of shipwrecks. The Spanish Armada was wrecked near there. After the Second World War it became increasingly difficult to eke out a living there. The islands have been uninhabited since 1953 when the last twenty-two people were moved to the mainland.

In the early twentieth century some island writers, such as Tomás O'Crohan and Peig Sayers, though they belonged to an oral culture, produced biographies of remarkable beauty and lyricism. The Great Blasket was called the island of poets. This *had* to have been the place where my character Deirdre Wild spent her first twenty years. I found out more facts about the people of the Blaskets, including some intriguing events that dovetail with my idea of my first generation woman artist, such as rebellious acts of certain women against the tax collectors. In short, the Great Blasket island inspired my novel in ways I could never have imagined before going there.

So, to sum up, two Irish women in love with art, the sublime art in Dublin's National Gallery, and a wild Irish island that fired my imagination had a huge impact on my research and it seemed at the time that these instances of research being *not* writing were more significant than any number of notes I had taken and books I had summarised.

Now I will examine the concept of writing being both research and not research. Someone who influenced both my research methods and my writing was Dr Peter

Stanley, now the Director of the National Museum's Centre for Historical Research. He conducted a workshop I attended at the ACT Writers' Centre in November 2005. 'Don't get it right,' he advised, 'get it written!' Now, most of us might know this but we know it in theory; the sense and practice of it can easily get lost in cases such as mine: embarking on the largest research and writing project of my life, and it was salutary to have that crucial advice reinforced, and at precisely the right time for me. Stanley defined writing as transmitting meaning to someone else. (This contrasts with my earlier definition of it as mere note-taking.) There may be a small amount of time at the beginning when one is researching and not writing, he said, but one must try to start writing as soon as possible.

As mentioned earlier, I perused and analysed many history, art biography and art history books for the background of my novel, plus theory books for my exegesis. I followed Peter Stanley's advice and resisted my impulse to wait until I had gathered all the notes I wanted until 'writing them up'. I resisted my initial urge to be methodical. Instead I opened myself up to the unexpected thoughts that emerged from the process of doing the writing and research together. The experience made me realise the paradoxical fact about the way my mind works, which can be expressed in the following rhetorical question: how do I know what I think until I see what I have written? Writing (as defined more broadly than mere note-taking) is a method of discovering what is in my brain, of isolating ideas that may have been obscured before seeing them articulated on a page, and of organising my previously inchoate or contradictory thoughts. As such, writing is definitely a method of research.

While it is true that writing is research, a case can also be made that writing is *not* research. My position and my past influence my writing without my researching them. As John Hughes pointed out in a lecture on 'Autobiography and Memory' at the HRC in 2006, when we are writing about others, we are also writing about ourselves. Why did I choose this particular PhD topic? There were personal reasons as well as intellectual. I was drawn to examining and attempting some resolution of successive generations of marginalised woman, of exploring, through fiction, my own family pattern of female artistic gifts whose potential remained unfulfilled because of historical and social forces, because of poverty, fire, a gambling spouse or because of other reasons I wanted to discover. My personal reasons and my position (on the fringes of the art world – working in galleries, exhibiting and selling my weavings and artist modelling – before going over to writing instead) have an impact on my writing perhaps as significant as the intellectual research I undertake. My ideas and memories, my philosophical and emotional stance, will influence the areas I want to write about and give my writing insights from a lifetime's experiences and vicissitudes.

Because of my particular past and my position, I became interested in reconstructing another space for myself – one where I could fulfil my potential by embracing both the artistic and the writerly aspects of my abilities. When I envisaged the artistic technique and ideology of my first generation protagonist, surrealism seemed apt because she was unpredictable and unorthodox, wild and intuitive. The surrealists were undermining the

logical order of things at the time (an order and a time that had produced the insanity of World War I) and reconstructing another space. This seemed to resonate with my protagonist's experience and it operated on two levels, literal and metaphorical. She is literally reconstructing another space, in emigrating from Ireland, and metaphorically reconstructing another space in her art. This example illustrates the bearing my past and my position have on the development of one of my protagonists.

Another aspect of writing being not research is access to the unconscious, which I believe is crucial, and not just for fiction writing. I think that the process of the unconscious simmering away behind the scenes is responsible for those glorious 'lightbulb' moments of originality and synthesis we get sometimes when writing. We need only allow our minds enough quiet space and time for illuminating subconscious insights to emerge for our writing – although I'm aware of just how difficult it is to find such space in contemporary life.

I think that almost any rhythmical, repetitive physical activity after a bout of writing will also give us easy access to our subconscious. Swimming will do it, or cycling, anything that establishes a relaxed state of being that allows the word-wearied brain to go where it will. The mind is open, relaxed and content to dwell in the uncertainty of an unsolved problem, as Keats famously described in 1817, calling the state one of 'negative capability ... being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.² In one of the many paradoxes of life, the solution to the problem often appears when we stop striving for it. The conscious brain, which has been exerting itself, straining to solve a puzzle or plausibly advance a complicated plot, becomes relaxed after a bout of mindless exercise, and then gives us our solution.

Painting can also put one into this state. Most painting is not from the logical part of the brain. When I paint I feel happy and calm and free. I came across a quotation from Matisse that expresses precisely the same feeling: 'When I started to paint, I felt transported into a kind of paradise ... In everyday life, I was usually bored and vexed by the things that people were always telling me I must do. Starting to paint, I felt gloriously free, quiet, and alone' (Morgan 1996: 9). I also maintain that getting up early in the morning will do it; we are closest to our subconscious then and anecdotally many writers tell interviewers they work best first thing in the morning.

This brings me logically to another activity, one of the first that springs to mind for anyone interested in surrealism: dreaming. Many 'hard' scientists and even some social scientists remain unconvinced that dreams are anything more than a sort of psychological sewage; they maintain that there is no proof of dreams being of any more use to humans than dealing with the day's refuse, a mechanical sifting and disposing of mental rubbish. But scores of fiction writers I have read, interviewed in books such as *Writers Dreaming* by Naomi Epel, disagree. I concur with the writers interviewed in this book that dreams are a manifestation of the deeper part of our brain that is necessary for writing to the best of our ability and for solving difficult problems (in writing or in any area of life).

Although Nigel Krauth, from the evidence in his stimulating and provocative Chapter 14 in *Creative Writing: Theory beyond Practice* (Krauth and Bardy 2006) would probably disagree with me about my emphasis on the unconscious in writing, I cannot resist quoting his statement in the same chapter: ‘Writers are hunters and gatherers in the real world’ (Krauth 2006: 187). We are not just dreamers, not just sitters at our desks. All our experiences feed our writing. The stimulation of work and other experiences of life, the cross-fertilisation of connecting with other people and sparring with other intellects and personalities stimulate ideas and spark insights, which lead to discussion, which leads to further insights, to seeing a problem or idea in a different light, perhaps to changes of mind.

I think that writers need a balance of connection and solitude, just as we need a balance of research and not research, of writing and not writing, the wild and the tame, the unexpected and the planned. In the same chapter above, Krauth goes on to say: ‘I had an insatiable appetite to be human – and being a writer offers one of the best ways to be comprehensively human’ (Krauth 2006: 187). I think that a balance of the variety of ways of writing and research allows an integrated style of writing to emerge and provides the best chance of producing work that is more than the sum of its parts, the insightful work of a writer who is not all intellect and not all wild activity, but who has embraced the richness of being fully human.

When in the midst of each of these aspects of research and writing I have been discussing, it seemed as if the one I was doing at the moment was the most important. But the truth for me is that no one aspect of the process is more important than another. My novel and exegesis are being written with the richness of research and not research, of writing and not writing, and my finished project will be the result of all these varied experiences. The important thing is to pursue all these activities, at different times, to form an integrated approach, which embraces not only the intellectual and methodical but remains open to the wild and unexpected.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.dingle-peninsula.ie/history.html> 21/08/07
2. John Keats *Letters* in Robert Gittings (ed), pp 43, 21, 27 December 1817; quoted in *History Workshop Journal* OUP 2006, 62.1: 241-52

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