

## **NiTRO Edition 24: The Contemporary Research Degree: Whose Project is it Anyway?**

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### **Journeying with the creative writing doctorate: whose story is it?**

Gina Wisker

Why would a creative writer, whose ideas are born in images and dreams, whose expression flows from them first like a spring and then a fabulous waterfall lit up by a rainbow of light, want to be so curtailed, constrained and managed by the shape and journey of a doctoral thesis? What kind of story might they possibly want to tell in a mode that has historically been antithetical to what we recognise as creative writing? Or is there a way, in the contemporary doctoral space, to push the boundaries of academic thought and rigour? Is there a way of re-claiming the space to connect creativity with scholarship?

To date I have supervised one creative doctorate to completion (UK) and examined five (Australia, New Zealand and the UK). With my friend and colleague Dr Gillian Robinson, I have journeyed alongside several others (Israel). We have researched and written about the enabling tensions of the creative doctorate, based on individual interviews, personal experience and on research visits where we have led supervisory workshops on just these tensions and processes – at the Royal College of Art, the University of Gothenburg and in the US, Australia and elsewhere (Wisker and Robinson, 2015).

I'm only going to talk about my own experience here, about those I have worked with as supervisor or examiner, and one as intrigued parent. I'm only going to look at the creative writing ones, which are actually all remarkably similar. They have all been in three parts: theorised set-up and situating; creative work; and self-critical situating and argument focusing on the creative piece. There will be many other forms, I hope, but these are what I've seen and they combine the different genres of academic research and writing – literary, theorised, philosophical, contextualising, data gathering and analysis, argument, establishment of the new contribution and the worth of that.

### **Modes of thinking and creating, tensions and rich interactions**

If you believe that all creative writing does is suddenly spin out of nowhere like a mini miracle and come into perfect being through genius (some of this might be true), you would worry about the creative writing doctorate being a contradiction. The first one I assessed threw up all of these issues and more. What I received, read, examined and discussed with the candidate on the day of the viva opened up a different world: the candidate's work. This thesis had a highly sculpted and managed three-part structure. The first part was a critical introduction to writing about self, personal issues and journeys, as a woman who identifies as lesbian exploring her own life. It was highly structured, well researched and included critical work on feminism, auto-ethnography, the writing and analysis of poetry, issues of

being and becoming, the politics of self-expression, the politics of poetry and creative writing, and work on women writers who use the vampire myth and metaphor to explore a myriad of issues. Her work, nested like a luscious, rich, dark blood-red living rose, was a series of poems exploring her personal journey, with the vampire as the central metaphor.

I have talked with doctoral students and graduates about the creative writing doctorate. At times, it appears it is an experience of being pulled in a million different ways, with destructive tensions, confusions of response, and legitimacy paralysis because of the two sets of demands (theory and practice). At other times it is like a beautiful dance between partners who not only agree on and create the choreography, but also match each other's movements and improve expression, theorisation, creation and argument as a result. Alongside the perfectly honed, balanced dance of creative, critical and reflective work, there is the mix of muscular power and seemingly weightless effortlessness – all of which takes immense dedication and practice studying the forms, the shapes and the journey through this critically based self-expression. It also needs creative harmony, improvisation and the spirit of creativity – a spark, a flame, tuned into the communicated and expressible.

With the two extremes brought together in dynamic tension, you can have something plodding – vampire poems can be plodding, a dystopian feminist fiction can be plodding. Each of these – and the sci-fi novel, the murder mystery, the poetry sequence and the zombie movie script (my son's creative-critical work) – can be derivative, heavy-handed in their message and fail to match claim to shape the achievement. However, they can also cross-fertilise and stimulate the creative and the critical/reflective to greater achievements and a more nuanced, clearer message. The structures, beats, choice and management of word shape, expression, rhythm, character, incident are, in fact, very much a partner with the structure of the critical situating and reflective appreciation of one's contribution. The theorised, researched, carefully managed thesis is, like the novel, poem or screenplay, also a creative, complex work of development.

Moving between theorised argument at the start of a creative writing thesis, the creative work and then critical placing and personal reflections appreciation, are different genres of writing yet ones that enrich and feed each other. While writing them can seem stressful, there are tensions of each playing across the whole, underlining the creativity, the spark being nursed to shape, the very structure enlivened: the beats of the argument, the beats in the story, the architecture of the novel and of thesis. The different writing styles need mastering so that in the end, they form a whole of different but harmonious parts. The whole could be seen like a quilt: the patterns hiding and revealing truths in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Alice Walker's sisterly quilt in *The Color Purple* (1982) and those (her inspiration) representing women's creative work in the Smithsonian Museum. The creative writing doctoral thesis is like those quilts – a very well-planned, highly imaginative creative work of established motifs, patterns, changed motifs, new motifs and

patterns pulled together, sewn together into a whole which is unique. But in a thesis we can trace the patterns, explore the motifs and let the parts – structure, form, tradition – play across and with each other.

Examining such work is a delightful difficulty. The critical-theorised, creative and self-analysing parts of the thesis – which may be separated out, or may be integrated into a hybrid work – are explored for their individual effectiveness. They do their respective jobs of setting up a theoretical basis – historically, politically, personally – explored clearly and in an owned, scholarly fashion, with the creative work in the centre. More than this, perhaps, the creative work seeps out from the centre, infiltrating ‘traditional’ scholarship with expressive and affective means – and vice versa. In this way, the whole is certainly more than the sum of the parts, and this rich construction is itself a contribution to knowledge.

### **References**

Atwood, M. (1996) *Alias Grace* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart).

Walker, A. (1982) *The Color Purple* (San Diego: Harcourt).

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