

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND  
WRITING AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION  
Conference Paper

## What a Plunge! Exploring Truths in Fiction

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What a Lark! What a plunge! thinks Mrs Dalloway on the morning of her party. What a lark, what a plunge is this business of life. Particularly during the good times, Virginia Woolf might have added, when words steam from the imagination, and fiction fills the pages. But not just the good times. Fiction is a risky business, this is part of its attraction. The reader or writer takes the plunge, can't see the ground below, can't anticipate where the fiction might lead. Can't know if it will swallow you up.

Plato didn't banish the artists because he thought they were a bunch of riff raff who lowered the tone of Athens. In fact, he was as partial as the next person to a good poem. Plato knew about the power of the unfettered imagination. How it can take people into mysterious and unknown places, introduce them to new and challenging, even subversive ideas. He knew that when the imagination is let off the leash all hell can break loose. This was not what he had in mind for his ideal republic.

Fiction, whether historical, fantasy, realist or pornographic is first and foremost the work of an active imagination. And when the imagination is working at full

throttle, revelations should never surprise. And the revelations can be very controversial. And I don't mean controversies over whether non-fiction history is more accurate—better—than historical fiction. The fact is they have quite different agendas. History gazes into the heart of time and place, fiction pervs on people.

Fiction, or rather the free-ranging imagination, has always tested current mores, has always questioned the status quo. This is powerful stuff—even more so given that the process can occur beneath the level of consciousness. In my new novel *Reunion*, there is a sexual relationship between a 40-year-old man and an adolescent girl. The characterisation—my characterisation—of both the man and the girl suggests the relationship is mutually beneficial. Indeed, the fictional techniques proved so successful that at a festival, when this aspect of the novel was being discussed by the audience, no one raised the possibility that the girl might have been exploited. It was only when I removed the issue from fiction and asked how they would feel if their 16-year-old daughter were having sex with a 42-year-old that they grappled with the moral ambiguities of such a relationship.

There is a power to fiction that can have it muting the usual moral responses and challenging long-held values and beliefs. Plato knew this and so, too, have a myriad of despots and totalitarian leaders.

Under Stalin, writers and other artists ended up in a gulag or dead, and those like poor Shostakovich who did not, ended up swinging a moral trapeze. Yet, such was the need—almost a hunger—for creative writing during the years of Soviet repression, that the great poets still composed and their poems were memorised and smuggled to the suffering people.

Hitler silenced the artists as early as he silenced the Jews—and given that there was an inordinately high proportion of artists who were Jewish the silencing was particularly efficient. Hitler personally defined what was good art, German art, art that would service the tenets and ambitions of national socialism—‘truthful’ art for those times.

The House Un-American activities, Joe McCarthy’s baby, interrogated more people in the arts than in any other area of work—and effectively ended the career of a good many of them.

To work around censorship restrictions and/or the political orthodoxy of the day, writers have often opted for fiction that employs metaphor or allegory. The great allegory in modern English is *Animal Farm*—‘Stalin’s World’ by any other name—written in the so-called democracy of Great Britain. This novel, first published in 1945 when Russia was still an ally (although treated with great suspicion by the Americans and British), is subtitled ‘A Fairy Story’. Orwell was a great essayist and, in fact, he did write essays critical of Communism and the Soviet Union, but it was this novel, *Animal Farm*, which packed—and still packs—the greatest punch.

And now in Iran the writers are being gagged. Although not the Iranian writers in exile. Shahriar Mandanipour was prohibited from writing between 1992–97. He came to the US as an International Writers Project Fellow and stayed. His new novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (Knopf, 2009, written in Farsi, banned in Iran) is truly about censoring a love story. Two young people meet at a student demonstration outside Tehran University and then spend the next 280 pages trying to START their relationship in a culture which does not allow an unrelated

male and female to be alone. In this novel, when the young people transgress Iranian laws and protocols, Mandanipour actually puts a line through the offending text.

The question arises as to how something which is made up can have such power that political leaders fear it, that people will risk imprisonment to write it, and ordinary readers find themselves drawn to strange, dangerous and often morally bankrupt company.

How is it possible to read *Lolita* and empathise with Humbert Humbert, fiction's greatest paedophile?

And to read *Crime and Punishment* and find over its more than 400 pages one's sympathies growing towards one of fiction's most notorious murderers—Raskalnikov.

And Macbeth and Medea, murderers both, yet how easy to understand why they behave as they do and justify their actions.

And Engleby, Sebastian Faulks recent creation, a serial murderer with whom I spent hour upon hour in the unique intimacy of reading. I was captivated by this character and his story—so much so I preferred to remain with him rather than read the latest LRB [*London Review of Books*] with its long essay on murder and killing in nineteenth-century England or *The New Yorker* with a feature essay on a man, tried and found guilty of killing his children in a fire. In fact, I preferred to remain with *Engleby* rather than do anything else.

Even when there is no sympathy, such as with Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs*, or Richard III, there is a fascination with the character and a desire to read and read and read. For there is a seductive power to fiction, to narrative, an irresistible pull to story, arising in large part because of the entrée fiction provides into the hearts and minds of people who are not ourselves, but who, through the magical intimacy of reading, are brought as close as friends or family. This is more than voyeurism: through the power and techniques of fiction we engage with these characters, we know them, we have a stake in their lives, and most importantly, their values and ideas.

The marriage of fiction with ideas is an enduring one. Fiction has always canvassed big ideas like betrayal, illusion, torture, obsession, guilt, and can explore them from multiple angles through multiple characters. You find yourself questioning long-held beliefs about love when you read *Lolita*, and re-evaluating soulless anonymous sex when you accompany William Beckworth to gay beats and bath houses in Alan Hollinghurst's *Swimming Pool Library*. You travel with these characters into dark and forbidden places.

This is the case whether the backdrop is the present culture or the past. When it involves exploration of ideas and truths, ambiguities and the vast complexities of existence, fiction provides limitless scope. In fact, by virtue of being fiction, the novelist actually has more licence to explore contentious issues than the writer of non-fiction. After all, it is *made up*. (Although this can be abused. There are well-known instances of writers labelling as fiction what is essentially memoir. The resulting work becomes a travesty both of the real events and of fiction itself. It also demonstrates a failure of courage of the sort that is anathema to the free-ranging imagination.)

In my fifth novel, *The Prosperous Thief*, I wanted to explore some of the complexities and moral ambiguities of the Holocaust. Acknowledging, much less exploring moral ambiguities of the Holocaust is not the usual terrain of Holocaust writings. Nor is fiction. The Holocaust canon has privileged memoirs and factual accounts over fiction. It was dangerous territory into which I was venturing. I could have written an essay—and in fact I did, after I had finished the novel (called 'Homer and the Holocaust' and particularly relevant to the topic of this session), but fiction allowed me to explore the issues from multiple angles through the points of view of different characters. The novel's form gave me entrée into the mean streets of Berlin early last century. The imagination took me into the heart and mind of the German Heini Heck, born in the gutter of 1910 Berlin, a petty thief who became a cook for the German army in WW2, who through an act one would condemn out of hand if it occurred in a different context, ends up a free man in Australia. It is so easy to condemn when one occupies the fundamentalist extremes of total condemnation or total acceptance. Wisdom goes hand-in-hand with doubt, with exploring the moral ambiguities. Fiction has no allegiance to any belief system, any prescribed dogma. Fiction's only allegiance is to the integrity and coherence of a compelling story.

In my most recent novel, *Reunion*, I have an heroic paedophile and an act of voluntary euthanasia. I can get away with writing about these moral and/or illegal issues and teasing out the stuff which makes us human because it is ONLY FICTION, it is all made up. But what I write is no less true, no less authentic for this.

And my characters—four of them: Ava, a novelist; Helen, a molecular biologist; Conrad, a celebrity philosopher; and Jack, a scholar of Islam—friends from university days back in the late 1970s—all of them made up. Made-up characters who appear *as if* real, who have crises of courage in their professional lives, who are hobbled by childhood pains long after they have left childhood behind, who fall in love—in the case of Jack, the scholar of Islam and my favourite character, obsessively so—who are narcissistic, who lose their footing when faced with age and illness. Made-up characters all of them—but revealing fundamental human truths.

**RATHER THAN CREATING FICTION FROM FACT—THE TITLE OF THIS SESSION—IT SEEMS TO ME THAT AS A NOVELIST, I CREATE FACT FROM FICTION.**

For there can be understanding through fiction. There can be justice too. We can speak in fiction where otherwise we might be silent. Whether history or the present, fiction riding the fuel of the imagination reveals the perils and joys of being human. Fiction can test the waters. Fiction can reveal discord and conflict, and do so from different points of view. Fiction can show that humans and their times are rarely clear and defined, written in black ink on flawless white paper.

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