**The Informed Imagination**

In July 2009, two artists from Ömie, high on the slopes of Mt Lamington in PNG, were in Sydney for an exhibition of their barkcloth art. Early in their visit, their sponsor David Baker, the then director of the now-defunct New Guinea Gallery, drove them and me, and Alban Sare, the Ömie man who’d come down with them, to a shopping mall to buy shoes and warm clothes. To Alban, who’d been to Sydney before and had spent time in Port Moresby, the mall was not so strange – just larger and shinier; he liked it. For Pauline Rose Hago, the younger of the two artists, familiar only with the town of Popondetta on the plain below Ömie, the cars in the car-park were enough to give her a headache. But Dapene Jonevari, a senior artist and a *duvahe,* (rather inaccurately translated as chief), went into a state of shock when bad spirits congregating on the escalators stole all her strength. I do not tell this as a comic story. I mightn’t believe in bad spirits on escalators, or not entirely, but I don’t doubt that Dapene, one of the strongest women I have encountered here or in PNG, was assaulted by the force of a world of which she’d never seen the like. What nature of beings were the new people she’d seen often enough down on the plain, and of whom she’d heard stories, though none to prepare her for this?

Back at my house later that day, Dapene was still limp, her expression glazed. Two cups of strong sugary tea didn’t seem to help. I looked to Pauline for guidance - as I had when I was in Ömie. She had been alongside me on every path, in every village, in the forests where Dapene led the women to cut the trees for their bast, in the houses where the women paint, in the rivers where we washed. Always Pauline; certain, strong-voiced Pauline. And here we were, in my place, in my house, and I was asking her for help.

‘Where is your ground?’ she asked.

Where indeed?

At the oval at the end of my street, they poked at the hard earth with toes in new shoes. Yes, they supposed it was ground, of a sort.

Your gardens? Pauline asked. They are where?

In the cities we have no gardens; we have shops, I said, and Pauline translated for Dapene; a murmur, all I had to interpret was tone.

We walked along the edge of the inner harbour to a park on the next bay, and as we walked Dapene regained something of her stature; by the time we returned to the oval, she and Pauline were singing Ömie songs. It was dusk, joggers were jogging past, the lights were coming on, as they sang to a rhythm I’d heard every day of my stay in Ömie.

Back at my house, they wanted to sleep – while in the kitchen I brooded on Pauline’s question, and my inability to protect them here, as they had me when I was on their ground. When they came downstairs for dinner – sweet potato and pork that didn’t convince them as pig - I’m pleased to report that Dapene’s strength had returned. Pauline took my hand and leaned into my shoulder. *Sister friend*, she said, the name she’d called me in Ömie.

*Sister friend.* It was a kindness, and I liked it, but in truth, was I, am I, sister and friend?

These were not academic questions. I was in the depths of yet another draft of *The Mountain* at the time, struggling with the post-colonial complexities of how to write as a white outsider of a country I first encountered in 1968 when I was 21 years old. After Dapene and Pauline returned to their mountain, I returned to my desk with Pauline’s question reverberating in me. Where was our ground: Ours in the sense of a highly asphalted world, and ungrounded culture? Where was *my* ground? Mine in the sense of the book I’d waited a long time to write, knowing it would be hard, knowing I’d need *experience* as a writer, and yet here I was with two decades of publishing under my feet (so to speak) and I was as uncertain as I had ever been. More, probably, because, unlike at the start - as many a writer has lamented – there was none of that magical innocence that can carry one through a predicament before you know enough to know you’re in one.

The ground I thought I had for the book that was not yet *The Mountain* was an approach to writing that had begun with *Poppy*, a fictive ‘biography’ of my mother. It had been there that I’d found a voice that felt authentically my own, and during the 1990s, I had became an advocate for the first person singular - the ‘I’, and the ‘eye’ - as a way of uncovering, or re-covering occluded feminine experience. With *Stravinsky’s Lunch*, I articulated this use of the first person as a ‘method’ – if that’s the word - that could draw together the imagined and the informed, the fictive and the researched. It was by bringing the imagining self to the gaps in the record that the writing self could reclaim the overlooked and under-recorded lives and work of women. Imagination - both imaginative embellishment and fictive methods - could thereby meld, as it were, with biographical and autobiographical writing to give shape to lives for whom the record was fractured and uncertain. The ‘informed imagination’ of the first person had become, in a sense, the ground of my writing and I took it unquestioned into writing about PNG. Why would I not?

In this lecture I am going to talk about why that ground proved unstable, and why in writing of *The Mountain* I came to reconsider the meanings, and limitations, of the informed imagination. So I hope I haven’t lured you here under false pretences, for under the rubric of the biography lecture, I am going to ponder my defection from that borderline ground between the biographical and the fictive, my journey through the check-points into the land of the novel.

1

I will start by taking you to Ömie in March 2004. The barkcloth artists of Ömie are now recognised, in the words of Nicholas Thomas, as ‘the most brilliant living exponents’ of a ‘great world art tradition’ that once stretched across the Pacific from New Guinea to Hawai’i. But in 2004, the Ömie, a small group of less than 2000 people, were impoverished and demoralised; only the oldest women were still painting. I was there with David Baker, who had seen their art and had been invited by a ‘a small group of young men who wanted to start a business that would bring status and pride as well as cash to this depressed and marginalised group. David Baker was there not as a small gallery owner, but as a sponsor - or potential sponsor – for he recognised that this was art that should be in major gallery collections. I was there, apart from my own interest which was considerable, so that I could write of what turned out to be a critical visit – which I did in a catalogue essay for *The Wisdom of the Mountain,* the major exhibition of Ömie at the National Gallery of Victoria that opened in November 2009, four months after Dapene and Pauline’s visit to Sydney. By then Ömie Artists was a community business registered in PNG, money was returning to Omie from sales, including to most of the major state galleries in Australia.

In the catalogue, I described the long, steep walk up to Ömie; the ridges, the forests the gateways to the villages. I described the day I sat with my notebook while David Baker met, in formal meeting, with the *duvahe.* I wrote of the tension between the responsibility felt by the *duvahe* to safeguard their traditions, and the community’s need for money for school fees, for lamps, tarpaulins and nails, maybe even a tin roof and a tank one day. I wrote of sitting with the women *duvahe,* Dapene among them, as they spoke of the young women who no longer saw the value of learning the exacting art of the cloth, of young men who needed purpose if they weren’t to drift into town and find trouble. Even through the processes of translation, I could understand that well enough. And I knew very well the onerous responsibility faced by David Baker. Did he do nothing, in which case the young men would try selling the cloth to tourists on the Kokoda Track, and if that failed, would the art of this exceptional but marginalised group fade away as the art of so many neighbouring groups had done? Or did he step in as sponsor, another white ‘saviour’ – there’s a long history to that particular trope. Could he/we avoid the sorry path too often trod by good intentions? Could we safeguard the art, and the interests of the Ömie, or was that, too, part of the whiteman fantasy?

A lot was at issue, and at risk, for the Ömie, for us outsiders, and - as it turned out - not only for the Ömie of the high villages that had maintained their art, but also for those lower down the mountain, who’d given up their cultural practices, including their art. Was this how they were to be rewarded for their move to the missions? We hadn’t even left the last village when trouble showed itself. Naivety and good intentions walked us slap into a ‘shake down’, a demand for money in the form of an arrest that stretched over two days.

Good material, you might say. An excellent predicament for someone wanting to give a lived shape to a post-colonial experience. But apart from the fact that I had undertaken to David not to write about the details of the shake down – at least not then, and not in the book I was ostensibly writing - had I tried to write of these events by using my usual approach, was my imagination sufficiently informed to write of what any of this meant to the Ömie, to the *duvahe,*  to the young men, indeed to those who felt slighted and aggrieved. The answer, obviously, is no. To write of it only from our perspective, would I not be falling into the worst trap of outsider writing about PNG - placing myself, or ‘us’ the white outsiders, in the centre of the frame. I’d read enough colonial memoir and fiction, to know the dangers of that trope – the white adventurers deep in the interior of Papua, suddenly endangered, rescued by their own resourcefulness, and the good office of ‘natives’ who take their side to defeat, or outwit, angry tribesmen. It wouldn’t take much of a twist to have a story straight out of the NSW Bookstall melodramas and romances of the 1920s and 1930s that were among the first to commercialise the uninformed imaginations of Australian writers and their readers. Colonial memoir and fiction casts a long shadow.

In a catalogue essay I could distance myself – the narrating ‘I’ - to a role of observer, reporting what had happened in a visible sense: the meetings, the tensions, the varying points of view as they were stated in relation to the matter of the cloth leaving the mountain, translated, and transcribed into my notebook. An inadequate research method, an anthropologist would say, but adequately observed (if not informed), I hoped, to the task of reporting the decision - if decision is the word - that brought the cloth to the National Gallery of Victoria five years later.

Were I to have attempted a memoir based on that visit to Ömie, it could have had a lot to say about the post-colonial complexities faced by David Baker and me, and by the other Australian who was with us and felt that David was making the wrong move, and subsequently withdrew. The barkcloth carried esoteric meanings for the Ömie; could its integrity survive sale and the temptation of commercialisation? Good questions, for sure, to which – as with more or less everything in this story – there is no one, clear answer. An anthropologist, or a philosopher might make something of it, but I was neither. Even if such a memoir steered off dangerously personal terrain, the same question arose: how could ‘our’ story be told without the view of the Ömie, let alone the view from the Ömie, becoming ever more occluded. What was their view, what did these great changes mean for them? How, on the basis of a month’s visit, was I to represent that without appropriating, or projecting, or sentimentalising, or mistranslating the un-translatable, even if there were the right to translate, even if I knew how, which I didn’t, and anyway couldn’t.

 The problem, I hope you are beginning to see, was the inequality between the white narrator and the post-colonial subject.

2.

The first intimation that I was moving towards fiction came with the character of Milton, the young Papuan writer who appeared on the page with a raised fist and a gift for language. He took me by surprise. He arrived unheralded and sat uncomfortably with the imagining ‘I’ that was trying to wrest some control over the mess on my desk. I mightn’t have expected him, or know what to do with him, but I knew exactly where he came from: those early years at the University of Papua New Guinea back before Independence, when, in the words of the great Samoan writer Albert Wendt, indigenous writing across the Pacific began, and ‘gained its first euphoric power and *mana* alongside the movements for political independence.

I had the good fortune to arrive there with my young anthropologist husband in 1968 as this surge of creative energy was beginning. While Nick tutored, I enrolled in classes with young men (mostly men) who knew that theirs would be the generation that would take this complex country of many languages into nationhood. For someone not long out of a English girls’ boarding school, that was extraordinary enough. More significantly, for me, I found myself in classes with students who were *writing.* They were writing plays in which plantation labourers rose up, and Papuan girls ran from the altar of white betterment; poems in which copra workers threw down their sacks and *kanakas* spoke back; short stories that lampooned missionaries and traders, and essays in the student newspaper that called administrators and colonists to account.

It may be in the nature of memory that experiences that come to us when we are very young, and not yet equipped to interrogate them, remain the most vivid. It is, I think, for this reason that Milton arrived on the page so readily. He is a student when we first meet him. A play he’s written is about to be performed at the university. Rika – the young white character onto whom I could split some aspect of my learning and unlearning (though not my autobiography) – takes her camera to rehearsals. ‘Publicity shots’, they called them, a grand term for a play to be put on in the canteen, but why not? When the *South Pacific Post* censors the photos, she and Milton stand firm together. The old-timer whites might call the university a *Mau Mau factory*, and condemn girls like Rika as traitors to their race. But right then, at that moment, Rika and Milton are united in the belief that the radical changes that were coming – literature for him, love for her – would eliminate prejudice, and – who knows – even render them the same, people under the skin. There would be painful reckonings to come, of course, for them as characters, and for me, writing, trying to write them.

Over my desk, I had these words from Albert Wendt: ‘*The* *post* in post-colonial does not just mean after; it also means *around*, *through*, *out of*, *alongside* and *against.*’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Looking back, and speaking personally, those years in PNG from 1968-1971, changed almost everything about the my life – and, because of that, I suppose, lived on in me, as a core to the book I was to begin over thirty years later. The impulse was frankly autobiographical, a vanity I admit, though it was also more, for there was something about that country and that time that had entered my blood and I wanted – vanity again - to bring PNG back into ‘our’ imaginative consciousness. For over the decades between the cultural surge of those years leading into political independence and the century’s end, it seemed to have seeped from fictional view. Once Australian journalists had flown up to investigate Black writing; Australian publishers had published writers from there, and well as from here. Randolph Stowe’s *Visitants* and Trevor Shearston’s *Something In the Blood* were both published in 1979, an outsider response, it could be said, to that powerful moment when *alongside* could join with *against*. Even these, our own writers, our own novels, have fallen from our collective memory. While more and more sophisticated work came from the pens of anthropologists and historians, fiction seemed to revert to old ways of seeing. Well into this new century, the pygmy and the naked tribesman still make their appearance in Australian fiction, and Highland girls, though no longer dressed in grass skirts, are as prey to the desires and fantasies of young white men as the fictional girls of the exotic south seas were nearly a hundred years ago. This despite the great post-colonial novels of world literature. It was a weird disjuncture I observed between the acute awareness of academia, and the remarkable obliviousness (it seemed to me) among our few novelists who ventured into PNG territory, sometimes without even going there, or, if they’d been there before, without returning. When a reason was given, it was that it was ‘too dangerous’; that or the wish to leave the imagination unencumbered as if there was something about Papua New Guinea that despite everything that had happened, could still offer a blank canvas to the outsider writer.

Hadn’t Beatrice Grimshaw complained eighty years ago or more of journalists who came up to Port Moresby, found a ‘cannibal queen’ within a mile of Government house, exchanged her story for a twist of tobacco, and caught the same boat home?

The persistence of the uninformed Australian imagination might have surprised me, but it didn’t surprise Regis Stella, the writer and critic teaching in the literature department of UPNG. When I went through Moresby, I’d see him and his colleagues, now my friends, Russell Soaba and Steven Winduo. At first, on my returns, our conversations were not always easy. Regis Stella, a stern critic, was suspicious, and why would he not be, this white woman reappearing after all these years, and with all the resources of an Australian research grant and a publisher, wanting to write about a time that had formed her, while they struggled with meagre resources to produce a literary magazine and publish small anthologies with no grants, no editors, no publishing industry, few bookshops. It would be awhile before I felt he could consider me a colleague. He was writing *Imagining the Other* then – it was published in 2007, just five years before he died, much to young, at the beginning of 2012. In it, he argued that the first task of the post-colonial indigenous writer was to understand and refuse the projections that have accumulated over the history not only of colonial but also – too often - of post-colonial fiction and memoir. It was a distorting lens through which Papua New Guineans had come to see themselves, a distorting lens that perpetuated the misconceptions of others. He was not about to let me forget that ‘we’ outsider writers, especially of fiction, too often place ourselves as the point of reference to the known, unquestioning modern, leaving the equally unquestioned residues of the unknown and unknowable non-modern to the Papua New Guinean, especially those living in villages, or other situations ‘we’ do not recognise as modern. The uninformed imagination was a habit of mind, Regis pointed out, that was not confined to Australia’s writers.

He and Steve Winduo were part of the tiny group of second generation writers; if anyone knows it’s tough, they do. PNG ‘has forgotten its early writers,’ Winduo has written in a recent essay[[2]](#footnote-2). Those one-time student writers had moved on to bigger and better things, and once in government literature was not among their priorities. Perhaps they remembered how those student plays could be used *against.* Writing and publishing was not an easy path in the years after independence, and certainly not profitable. Which was why, to Regis, and Steven and Russell, it was all the more important that the flame be kept alive. A flame *against* the corruptions and inequities we hear a great deal about; a flame *around, through, and out from* the hard work and successes we don’t hear about: the conservation workers and environmental lawyers; the children’s libraries and water collection projects; the work that is containing the spread of HIV.

There was a role, I could see, for *alongside*, and it’s not as if there wasn’t rich material. But I was stuck somewhere between the failings of a method that had once served me well, and the daunting land of fiction I was creeping towards. It’s a rigorous form, the novel, far from easy, and there are those who question the relevance for the Pacific of a European form in which western ideas of subjectivity are deeply imbricated. Regis Stella preferred the short story and the polemic as better suited to Melanesian forms of oral story telling and rhetoric. But Steve Winduo, who has just this year finished a novel, was far from pessimistic. For him, the novel is a flexible form, with its own language; look what they’ve done with it in Africa, in South America, in Samoa. Why shouldn’t the novel make the transition into Melanesia, isn’t it part of the inheritance of world literature? Hadn’t I heard of hybridity, he’d say when my anxieties showed. And besides, he’d say, look at Russell Soaba, who’d be sitting there, inscrutable and benign, the one writer from those early days who has written his way through the intervening years, and is writing still. I salute him. His novels *Wanpis* and *Maiba*, two great post-Independence novels,should be on every post-colonial literature course in this country, but they are not even published here. Steve and Regis, fine writers both, have published out of Hawai’i or USP. Or they publish themselves. Australian publishers have long since lost interest in fiction from PNG. It doesn’t sell, my publisher told me when I told her I wanted to write the book that would become *The Mountain.*

‘Russell Soaba often reminds me,’ Winduo says, ‘that the life of a Papua New Guinean writer is a difficult one because the society itself is a difficult one.’

Shame added to the white baggage that sat with me at my desk. By the time Dapene and Pauline visited Sydney in 2009 all I had was a shaky draft of a book without a title that was still teetering somewhere between an insistence that was autobiographical and a hope that was not yet fiction.

My strategy had been to create characters from the stories I knew, blending and amalgamating and inventing as one can’t in memoir, or biography. I also fictionalised myself, if that’s the right way of putting it, distancing the narrating ‘I’ onto a character twenty years my senior, a narrative intelligence I thought I could use to tell the story, letting her be the one to comment on the characters of my generation and the vexed politics of post-colonialism. What I was doing with this book didn’t, then, strike me as so different from anything else I’d written. Hadn’t I always worked in that contested zone between the fictive, the autobiographical and the historical? Was I not still exploring that rubbing point between the small experience of lived lives and the washing tide of events that catch us up in its momentum. All that was different, I thought, was that this time I was coming at it with characters who were fictional, whereas before I’d come from the other side, so to speak, with characters who had existed in history, or in family, and had left a paper trail, however fractured or incomplete.

‘It’s not working,’ my publisher said. I could tell by her face. My friend Hilary McPhee, who’d published *Poppy,* agreed. ‘You can’t shift it all onto a narrator twenty years older. She sounds like you trying not to be you.’

 *Around*, *through*, *out of*, *alongside* and *against.* I was nowhere near, trapped in the outer reaches of my own vanities.

3.

Philip Roth, a writer I greatly admire, has said that it takes a crisis for a novel to find its shape.[[3]](#endnote-1) For me with *The Mountain* that crisis began with Pauline’s question: *where is your ground*. Then, four months later, in November 2009, within days of the Ömie exhibition opening at the National Gallery of Victoria, their sponsor David Baker died suddenly - by which I mean over night, without warning. As a result, his sponsorship of the Ömie ended, and students whose fees he was paying, not only there but across PNG, could no longer continue at school[[4]](#endnote-2). This, to say the least, added to the destabilisation of my own sense of ground and changed a great deal about the way I continued my own relationships in PNG. Never again would I be the observer who could watch, make notes with her clean, writerly hands, then go home and fret about a novel. What was going to happen to Ömie Artists? That alone was a big enough question. Three people came down for the opening, and none had been further than Popondetta before. What had caused this disaster? Had bad spirits entered into him, or into them? There was dispute, as well as dismay, in their villages. What would become of the children whose school fees he was paying? And in the fjords of Cape Nelson what would happen to those resilient villages where they done so much to move with strength and intelligence between the ‘old’ and the new’.

What would happen if they could no longer get their students past year 8 – when the fees are too high for village families – with the loggers already within sight in Collingwood Bay. I could speak for an hour about what was involved in all these questions, and what I learned of the politics of Aid and Development - and of the logging, much of it illegal, which now effects over five million hectares of customary land.[[5]](#footnote-3) This is not incidental, nor a crude political plug. I had spent time with an elder at Uiaku, just along from the fjord villages, where the land-owners had won a long court case against the loggers, only to have them return in another guise. I’ve been back since, and I know the cost, in every sense of that word, to that man, to that community.

It was not only in the villages that my relationships changed. In Port Moresby, the talk with my writer colleagues at UPNG also changed as I struggled with these non-writerly questions. Russell and Steven and Regis were wise interlocutors, and I thank them for it, and for the comradeship that grew between us. Write that novel, was the message I took from them. Every voice is needed. This time, when I wanted to say *but how,* another voice in me said *get over yourself.* *Hybridity*, Steve said again, aren’t we all, in our different ways, existential *hapkas,* and he gave me that enabling word from *tok pisin,* that has shrugged off its negative connotations of *half caste* to embrace complex cultural identities. And all the while, there was Russell Soaba still writing, producing a blog, teaching students that their stories, and the stories of their place, and of events they see around them, *matter*, that poetry matters, and so does the novel.

*Witness* was the word Regis Stella used, and I came to see it applied (in some small measure) to me as well as to the writers there whom he was addressing.

When Janet Malcolm, another writer I admire, faced a crisis of a very different kind in her writing life, she said that it took her ‘out of a sheltered place and threw [her] into bracingly icy water. What more could a writer want?’[[6]](#footnote-4) Icy is hardly the word for anything to do with PNG, and no writer would want the death of a friend. But she has a point.

I finally returned to my desk sometime in the Australian winter of 2010 with very different mental settings. The memories to which my vanities had been in thrall, slid back; I stopped looking for signs of the past. The present had claimed me, and it mattered. The post-colonial policeman who’d been standing duty over my desk vanished; I didn’t have to batter him as Virginia Woolf had the obstructive Angel in her House. I was angry, and bruised, and no longer afraid. The effect was indeed bracing. I sat down and rewrote the manuscript that was not yet called *The Mountain* in the third person. Martha, no longer narrator, lost a lot of her story, most of her point of view, dropped in age by twenty years and became a character in the ensemble of characters who at last had room to stretch and breathe – and, yes, to look at each other, and look back. Ensemble, that was the word that came to me: *they*, all of them, not *me*, not ‘I’. Milton sighed a sigh of relief.

As to the result, well, it’s out there in the world, and though I probably know its faults and failures better than anyone, it’s not my job to lay them out, nor, indeed, to consider its virtues, if virtues there are. What I will say is that out of that period of radical doubt, the ground of my writing changed. *The Mountain* is novel – at last I can say that - a character based novel that gives voice to the predicaments underlying all I’d experienced, or seen, or known in that magnificent, heartbreaking country. It is as personal as anything I have written since *Poppy,* but it is not autobiographical. The ghost of people I have known may hover above it, but it is not biographical. The characters – still, to my wonderment – are fully their fictional selves, so much so that I lament that they are not there to talk to. With *the Mountain* I crossed the borderline from a biographical form that might be called literary non-fiction, or life-writing, into the strange and mysterious world of the novel. At some profound level, the process of fiction remains mysterious to me, and I don’t know how I did it. When I say ‘mysterious’, I mean it. It is not belittling the intellectual work of fiction to say that it may be that it needs to be written from the corner of the eye. What I can do in conclusion, and will in the next, final section of this lecture is to tell you, looking back, what I have learned about the ‘informed imagination’ and why my old methods failed me.

4.

Fiction writers often talk of empathy as the task, even the technique of fiction. Hilary Mantel talks of getting behind her character’s eyes, and every writer will know what she means. As I say, it’s what I had tried to do through the ‘informed imagination’ of the narrating self in my previous books. But Mantel also warns that we cannot proceed on the assumption that historical characters (in her case) are like ‘us’; we can’t hop behind their eyes and look out with ‘our’ eyes. Somehow the eyes we have to get behind must be theirs: and that’s the paradox. Fiction must do what is not possible.

It was this point – on the limits of the empathic imagination – which Inga Clendinnen took up in her 2006 *Quarterly Essay*, ‘The History Question’. Triggered by the debate over Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River,* she notes that Grenville did not attempt to enter the minds of her Aboriginal characters for a number of good reasons, including that there’s been ‘enough appropriation already’, and because she, Grenville, recognised it as an empathic move she was unable to make. Clendinnen has no quarrel with this. What she questions is that Grenville saw no impediment to imagining herself into the minds and experiences of settlers on the Hawkesbury. For Kate Grenville, as a novelist, the question to ask was ‘What would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me?’ Clendinnen, as a historian, counters that ‘we’ people born of modernity cannot imagine ourselves back even 200 years, when people ‘really did think differently.’ For her, the challenge of writing history – and the same could be said for biography - is to understand and represent this difference. For Grenville, the challenge of fiction is to make her characters ‘real’ to her audience, which, by its nature can only be of now.

I don’t want to reprise a debate that has been divisive and painful, other than to say that through it, I came to understand that the ‘informed imagination’ does not only mean qualifying ‘informed’ with ‘imagination’ as I had done; it also requires us to bring an informed intelligence to the nature – and limitation - of imagination itself. It would have been a grave error on my part to think that ‘I’ could sit in a village in PNG and ‘imagine’ myself into a village person. What would it be like for someone like me to be a village woman? Well if I were a village woman, I would not be the ‘I’ that writes this from the asphalted world of escalators. Even the briefest acquaintance with psychoanalysis alerts us to the deep structures of self-hood laid down from infancy, so that while we might all bleed, and do, our sense of ourselves and our understanding of self in relation to other and society, can radically differ. This is a matter much debated by anthropologists. My task, I came to see, was as a novelist, not as some kind of inadequate faux anthropologist. So it’s perhaps fitting that, for all my reading, the point made itself, and a certain emotional sense, when I first encountered in Ömie the image of the tree as a metaphor for the clan. Whereas in the Anglophone west we draw a family tree from the top of the page with each individual marked along horizontal generational lines, the Ömie draw their tree upwards. The roots represent the Ancestors, the trunk the members of the clan, all in together, and the branches are symbolic of the strong and wise – the *duvahe* - who stretch the clan into the future*.* This does not mean that everyone in the trunk is the same – you only have to be an hour in a village to know that – or that they think of themselves as the same. But it does mean that their taken-for-granted sense of who they are in relation to each other and their society is markedly different from the way we in the west, each with our place on our horizontal lines, take for granted the nature of self.

That is what my character Rika, who wants only to be the same, has to learn. She has to learn it in her professional life with her camera, and that is a hard enough. In her personal life, in her deep love for Aaron, it is harder still coming to understand how she is seen and, in a sense, can only be seen, especially by the older members of the fjord village where Aaron was born and grew. She might be called sister-friend by his young women kin, she might refuse all difference, and does, in the name of race equality; are we not all the same under the skin? She might wish to be the same, *ache* to be the same, but she is not. Her marriage to Aaron looks very different to the village than it does to the cosmopolitan young in Port Moresby celebrating the mixing of race and colour. To them their marriage can symbolise the changing tide of history, the new day coming, but to the older women in the village, the *aya*, whose task it is to hold the ground steady, it is a turbulence in the order of things. To the young women in the village, her sister friends who have a greater sense of the changes that are coming, Rika’s IUD – a piece of metal inside her to stop the making of babies – is as incomprehensible as it would be to a woman in contemporary Australia that there are indeed certain springs where a woman should go if she wishes for a baby. The point I spell out here in the terms of this lecture, is that to dismantle the ‘other’ does not mean to replace ‘other’ with ‘same’. Like so much in life, movement between the two depends - to use the camera metaphor – on what lens you use, what focus and exposure, and who is behind the camera.

From the first page of the first draft of this book, Rika came off the plane with a camera. And from the first page of the first draft I didn’t understand why - and had several attempts at getting rid of it. (On top of everything else, its presence meant I had to learn more about photography.) But my unconscious, or the unconscious of the novel it hadn’t yet become, was ahead of me – for the camera proved central, even essential, to *The Mountain* - not only in its literal use by characters (who are white) but as a motif, a device (though I hope not too obvious a one) an *analogy* for the writing lens as it moves in and out onto and among the characters. It gave me the clue, if you like, of how to write once I’d relinquished the epistemological grip of a first person narrator. It was, for me, a kind of liberation. By pulling myself right back, I was able to frame and reframe the various stories, and perspectives, and predicaments I had for so long wanted to give voice to. It’s an obvious point, but worth saying, that a novel does not have to inhabit every character in the same way; empathy can go quite a distance, and it can also rein back in and let language and imagery do its work of conjuring the unexpressed and letting us glimpse the different as itself.

The point I came to see is that fiction stands on different ground from biography and history. There might be scope for play along the borderlines, and there surely is, but there is also a ravine, to use Inga Clendinnen’s word for it, that we should respect. While I am not foolhardy enough to speak for the historian, or even the biographer, it could be said, I think, that from the point of view of writing, there *is* an epistemological necessity for the biographer or historian (however far forward or back they project themselves) to act as the lens through which we can trust the selection, presentation and interpretation of the lives put before us. The novel, as an imaginative act, allows a different form of knowledge. It might contain argument, but it is not an argument; it involves interpretation, but does not depend on any one character to make it. The intellectual work of a long, fictional narrative stands on the ground of perspective and patterning, voice and language, metaphor and image.

There’s a great deal I could say about the novel as a form, but that’s a topic for another occasion. Here I will say in conclusion only this: that by leaving that zone where the fictional and the biographical can meet, I could bring a polyphonic perspective to the moral predicaments in which this book had entangled me, and to the tide of events that had gathered us all in – all the people I have spoken of in this lecture, and more – and changed us all, whether cosmopolitan or villager or cultural *hapkas*, in ways we may have tried to control, but invariably could not. *But* by crossing into the land of fiction, and by creating characters who do not equate in any simple way, or even at all, to myself or to the many lives I’ve bumped up against in my rich experience of PNG, I had confronted myself with a possibly greater challenge.

For while the best of biography and memoir also depend on the skill of the writer to use the conventions and writerly devices of biography without them appearing conventional, for the novelist the stakes are higher. For a novel that cannot conjure *lifeness,* life on the page, has nothing in the annals to fall back on. If its characters do not move us, if we do not believe in the world they create, the writer cannot then fall back on biographical veracity and say that these people, or people like them, really did exist. A poor biography might still tell us something historically worthwhile, and hand the baton on. A bad novel tells us nothing, and if it does not allow us to glimpse ‘that blue river of truth, curling somewhere’, as the critic James Wood calls it, there is little left behind.

That’s the rub.

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1. Albert Wendt, Introduction to *Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English Since 1980*, University of Hawai’i Press, 1995, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Steven Winduo,*Transitions and Transformations in Papua New Guinea Literature and Politics,* UPNG Press and Bookshop, 2012, p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. Colin Filer, ‘The Political construction of a Land Grab in Papua New Guinea’, Australian National University, Pacific Discussion Paper, September 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Janet Malcom, Paris Review Interview: The Art of Non Fiction No 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)