That’s my story and I’m sticking to it: truth in fiction, lies in fact

by Marion Halligan

A funny thing happened to me on the way to this festival. I was in a taxi, going to the airport, sitting in the back as I like to do, but I had got into conversation with the driver, so as not to appear too snobbish. She was a woman about my age, I suppose, rather stout, with brown curly hair pulled back into a pony tail. She asked me where I was going, and I said to Tasmania, for a literary festival. Oh, she said, are you a writer.

Once I would have been nervous about this question, but now I think, be brave, say yes. So I said, yes, I was a writer. Well, she said, So am I.

I’d heard of actors driving taxis to make money to keep doing their real work, but this was the first time I’d actually met a writer paying the bills thus. This woman was driving quite fast, not changing lanes much I was pleased to notice, because she held her head cocked to where I was sitting, and kept fixing her eyes on me in the rear vision mirror. I wanted to say, look, it’s driving you’re doing at the moment, how about concentrating on that, but she was keen to tell me about the writing.

Yes, she said. I’ve written about 25 things, and I’ve actually had 3 of them published.

Great, I said, that’s really good.

Yeah, she nodded. And I’m hoping for some more one day. I love being published. It’s hard, though.

Tell me about it, I nearly mumbled, but remembered the driving. I know, I said instead, in a naturally heartfelt way.

Yeah, she nodded again, really tough. A lot of editors just don’t want to know.

I wondered what she wrote. Was she a poet, perhaps. You could write some good lines in a taxi, if you had taciturn customers. Or short stories. I wrote a lot of short stories in the days when I drove kids around.

What do you write, she asked.

Novels mainly, I said. And what about you?

Letters, she said. Letters to the newspaper. The Canberra Times did one, and the Chronicle took the other two. About the primary school closing. But it was the Canberra Times that was the real thrill. Pro-abortion that one. A lot to be said.

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I was hoping you would laugh at that, because then I would have fulfilled the first rule of public speaking: say something funny at the beginning, then the audience will listen more comfortably when you get on to the serious stuff. And did you notice how classical my opening was: a funny thing happened to me on the way... Straight out of vaudeville. And maybe that will give you a clue to what I am going to say next. It’s rather a nice story, that, the story of the woman who thinks she’s a writer because she has had some letters to the editor published in the newspaper, and it’s actually true, but it didn’t happen to me on the way to the airport. That taxi driver was a Turkish man who told me three times not to get into any arguments with hijackers.

Taxi drivers are a classical device too. The actually rather pathetic story of the letter writer was told me some years ago by a friend who went along to address a meeting of the FAW — the Fellowship of Australian Writers — and found ladies knitting and talking about their writing in such terms. It’s a salutary story about a different subject, the burning desire that so large a proportion of the population has to be a writer. But that’s another story.

But what is relevant here is your response to this. Do you mind that I told you this tale as though it actually happened to me, and quite recently? Does it matter? Do you feel a bit cheated, perhaps, do you wish I hadn’t told you that it wasn’t true as I claimed? Would it be more amusing or more somehow important if I had gone on pretending that it actually happened on my way here, so that the story was serendipitous as well as rather sadly funny? Or do you think my artfulness simply makes it more interesting?

After all, we are all familiar with the polishing of anecdotes. Most of us do it. Something funny happens to us, which we turn into a story that we tell a number of times, but we pare it down, stretch it out, cut some bits, highlight others, exaggerate just a little. Many of us will have suffered the irritation of being corrected by partners: No no, we didn’t have to wait for an hour and a half, it was barely 25 minutes. No no, there weren’t 80 people there, more like 20. We know this perfectly well, but it’s our anecdote, we don’t want someone who was there stickling for the facts, ruining our impact. If it is your spouse doing this to you I think it is grounds for divorce.

Most of us turn our lives into stories for those around us. Partners come home from work, and offer one another a kind of Days of our Lives saga of villains and heroines, treachery and corruption, running gags and tragic fates. All in the context of office, business, any variety of workplace. Children come home from school bursting to tell the stories of their day, which they will do with great skill and éclat. Though the interesting thing is that once they have done it, they let it go. No use in daddy, who’s been the first recipient, saying tell mummy what happened: out comes a flat and abbreviated garble without any of the spirit that animated the first telling. Learning to shape and polish and keep them in the repertoire comes later.

And the thing is, we are good at listening to stories, at putting them together, filling in the gaps, understanding the conventions. We know how to listen to the tales of the lives of the people we are fond of. We know how to listen to jokes. Which can have a truly amazing topicality. The space shuttle crashes, killing seven people, and within a couple of hours there are jokes going round about it. Have you noticed this is the verb for what jokes do? They go round.

We are fascinated by urban myths, and sometimes tricked by them: there are stories reported in Sydney at the moment of Asians being attacked with syringes full of blood by people who cry, Welcome to the world of AIDS. There are numerous reports of this happening, and always in specific locations, much to the distress of their Asian-looking inhabitants, but there are no official complaints, the police have had no such reports, the story is always told by someone who had it from someone who had first or second hand knowledge of it.

Such urban myths may be very cruel. Others are simply funny, as well as ubiquitous, like the grandma on the Volkswagen, or the naked woman who gets out of the caravan stopped by the side of the road to pee and is left behind by her oblivious husband. These stories come and go, travel, resurrect themselves, but they are always true.
someone always swears that someone swore to them that they actually saw it happen. Was there ever an actual occurrence of any of these events, or did somebody once make them up from scratch? I’d go for the actual occurrence, in some form; people invent little, they shape and polish, adapt, elaborate.

Some people do this for a living, well, as their life’s occupation; they take the stories they find around them, polish and shape them in words of their own, and offer them to the society they inhabit. If the society values these stories, these particular versions of events, it will publish them and buy them and read them, and call their makers writers. Sometimes the writers’ intention is to reproduce these stories exactly as they find them, as strictly and as purely as they can be known and judged in entirely empirical terms to have happened. Of course this never can be so perfect and pure as they intend; humans are creatures of imagination, their preoccupations will always influence their perceptions with some degree of idiosyncrasy. Nevertheless we can accept that their intentions are factual, and call what they are doing history. Or possibly memoir.

Other writers take the stories around them with a regard for their truth but they allow their imaginations full play in their perception of it. They don’t claim that this really happened, but had it happened this is how it would have been. We call such people novels. They need to achieve verisimilitude, otherwise nobody will believe them. Fact can be as bizarre as it likes: incredible, we say, but it actually happened, so yes, believe it. Fiction must be credible, or we will have no faith in it. Moreover, fiction has higher standards of intrinsic interestingness than fact.

I know that non-fiction writers claim that their prose is just as much a work of art as the novelist’s, that the imagination plays just as important a role, and of course it should. The difference is that non-fiction writers should not use their imaginations in the production of their facts, whereas fiction writers must invent their events, or at least invent the way they put them together.

Of course, quite often fiction is also a matter of history, of verifiable events. We know that a lot of David Copperfield actually happened to Charles Dickens. That Jane Eyre in parts is the life of Charlotte Brontë. Most of Wuthering Heights probably didn’t happen to Emily Brontë, but she felt as if it could have. Labourers chipped turnips in exactly the manner of Tess of the d’Urbervilles, and priests refused holy burial to infants born out of wedlock. When people sit down to read Margaret Drabble they know that it is telling them it is. From when she is a young girl just finishing university, turning into a wife, a mother, a woman with a career, a person divorcing, until she is middle-aged and disillusioned, examining her own past and the present of governments and foreign policy, Drabble has mined her life for our contemplation.

Mined is a good metaphorical word for it; she has chopped out chunks of the raw material, cut and polished them and finally displayed them in highly wrought settings for our detection. Asking which bits are real is about as sensible as wanting to know which bits of a diamond necklace are real. The whole work achieves a reality which is its own; which bears a meaningful relationship to the actual world but is one which illuminates rather than is it.

And what if the necklace is paste? Why not? If it is a brilliant work of art in its own right; the main thing is that it should be honest about which it is. Lying can have dire consequences, witness Maupassant’s terrible story of the not very rich young woman who borrows a friend’s diamond necklace to go to a ball, loses it, and spends her life in dreadful penury to pay for it. Her friend meets her twenty years later, and is shocked at how old and worn she looks. It’s because of the necklace, the woman tells her. And her friend says: My poor Mathilde… my necklace was paste. The unnecessary horror of that line has reverberated through literature for more than a century.

If your passion is autobiography, and there are people whose preferred reading it is, people who do not seem to understand that the genre is just as much a diamond necklace as is a novel, except that if the stones are small and dull and of low carat you can say, well, that’s how they were, I had no choice, I had to work with what I was offered, such aficionados may say that it was society’s taboos, the need for modesty and discretion may say that it was writing novels, because that way they could disguise their own real-life experiences, but that now these taboos are broken down and women are being encouraged to write in their own voices, now they have found the necessary bravery, they are taking up the purer and more honest form of autobiography. Notice how loaded are the words. Jill Ker Conway takes this point of view in her book When Memory Speaks, but of course autobiography is her stock in trade.

Oscar Wilde, who had answers to just about everything, had a word for this, and put it into a piece called The Critic: ‘Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.’

My response to the idea that autobiography is somehow a higher form that our freer society has allowed us women to aspire to takes the form of a question. Would you rather have Charlotte Brontë’s autobiography than Villette? Than Jane Eyre? The two novels are richer, broader, more complex, more ambiguous, than a straightforward first person account of her life would have been. The novels create whole worlds of people and places and emotions which we the readers can inhabit, whereas an autobiography is something we look at from outside, it turns us into voyeurs. And in Charlotte Bronte’s case its main interest is that it is the life of the artist that gave us these great novels; the works are her claim to fame, not the life. Plus there’s the fun of a puzzle to unravel: which bits happened, which did she make-up. It’s not important, but it’s fun.

Of course autobiographers and biographers know this, or anyway they have recently learned it, and now they want it for themselves. So they write fictionalised autobiographies. They may call them novels, so they can do all the fun things that novels do, playing about with actual facts, inventing new ones, knowing you can get away with every kind of fiction provided you achieve verisimilitude, true-seeming. And if you do have some facts that are strange, bizarre, incredible, you can have them too because they really happened. So this gives you the nod-and-wink autobiography, when the author of it says Of course it is a novel you know; but also understands that the facts of his life will give a special poignancy to the story he is telling.

A most elegant example of this is Robert Dessaix’s Night Letters (Pan Macmillan). It is a pseudo-autobiography in genre, a first person account of a part of the narrator’s life, in which he allows his imagination its full rein (gallloping off on the back of a leopard, indeed, wearing a large black hat with a cassowary feather) at the same time as he plunders a magnificent hoard of treasure stories from the past, but where we know that the fantastical structure is hung on certain large and uncomfortable facts. On death bed, at unaccommodating fact of all, and its immense, and from a particularly contemporary, is the bravery and insouciance and cavalier ways of the book are given bite and backbone by these iron facts. So the author has it both ways, he charms us with the intricate novel-world he creates, and moves us by the pathos of the actual story we know is its counterpoint. It’s a brilliant performance, and a successful one; the book has been hugely popular.

Less successful to my mind is Drussilla Modjeska’s The Orchard (Pan Macmillan), which tries to create the same fine balance between factual and imaginative truth. But its skills aren’t those of the novel, and we can only believe in its events if we believe in them as facts; neither characters nor dialogue nor occurrences have that imaginative power of verisimilitude that makes us believe in them as fictions. They don’t manage to have it both ways: if they are facts we want more evidence, if they are fictions we want more life.

At the beginning of the movie Fargo, there are words to the effect that the story, of a kidnapping, is based on real-life events. After the film had been around for some time, and been successful, its makers admitted that no, it wasn’t based on actual events, they’d made it up, but it was rather slow and they thought that people would have more patience if they supposed it really happened, because that is the way life is.

I am annoyed by books which pretend to be real life in order to make us patient with their slowness and dullness.

I expect you are wondering about my use of the words real, and true, and actual, fact. They aren’t synonymous, by any means, and I am trying to be very precise in my choices. It seems to me that truth is what we are all seeking, but we get it confused with the real. A novel has to be true or we won’t believe it in, but it may not be real, it may not be in the sense of things that actually happened. But sometimes I think writers try to trick us by offering us instead of truth that quite different currency, the actual happened. And sometimes they pretend it actually happened, even if it didn’t, in order to get us believing in its verisimilitude. So instead of using their fiction-making skills to create a world in which we believe, they use their polemicist-political skills, saying trust me, it actually did happen. Maybe it seems dull, or banal, or weird, but that was how it was.

Moreover, readers and critics are polite towards what is perceived as, what calls itself, autobiography, they don’t think, Hmm, dull story, clumsy plot, wooden characters, dialogue like a train timetable. No, this is somebody’s life offered here on the page, it would be churlish to judge it by the standards of fiction, to do otherwise than accept it with gratitude.

I am afraid that this is making readers forget what it is that a good novel can do. It’s not real, they say, it’s a work of the imagination. Forgetting that a work of the imagination that makes us believe in it is a very fine thing indeed. It can take dull ordinary facts, the quotidian lives of ordinary people, and make them riveting. Not at all requiring ch Gore.

Journalists sometimes place undue emphasis on actual-happening creating authenticity. For example, with Matt Condon’s recent novel, Pillow Fight (Random House). Its purring title refers to its subject matter, it’s about domestic violence. The twist is that it is the wife who beats her husband, she is a tough and violent person, and he suffers in that mute and strangely accepting way, at least for a while, that is so typical of cases of wife-beating. Matt Condon has been married but isn’t now.

Don’t forget, this book is a novel. But journalists have been ringing up his friends and asking them is the story true, was he beaten up by his wife, is he writing about what
mostly interesting. Fortunately his friends, who know the answers to these questions, have refused to reveal them; the book is a novel they say, it must be read as such, whether he actually suffered in that way or not is irrelevant, what matters is how well, with what conviction, he tells the story. If you read the articles the journalists finally wrote, you can see their irritation that they couldn’t find out that Condon’s events actually happened; their prurient curiosity was left unsatisfied. Of course they have their suspicions, but so far nobody will confirm them. Hooray, say I.

In other words, books aren’t interesting as works of art but only as they can be sloted into the workings of the lives of the people who make them. Rodney Hall’s publicist announces that he has a new book. Yes, says the journalist, but isn’t he still living in that same picturesque place with no electricity down the South Coast? Isn’t he still married to the same wife? There’s no new story there. But the fact is Rodney Hall is interesting because of the book, not vice versa. There’s a danger that writers may start living their lives in order to make their fiction newsworthy. Divorcing their wives, or, why not, murdering them, so that the press will pay attention.

When I wrote Spider Cup (Penguin), which is a novel about jealousy, about a woman whose husband tells her he is in love with a young girl and is going to leave her, I made my heroine think, stuff that, jump on a plane and go to France. Two can play this leaving game she thinks, or rather, that only one can and she’ll get in first.

You’d be amazed at the number of people who want to know: did that really happen, is it based on real events, did I actually have a husband who … and did I in fact get on the next plane to France … was it a fact that my whereabouts only become apparent when the American Express bills arrived … and so on.

Elinor, my heroine, goes to a house in a village a little south of the Auvergne, and contemplates a local legend about a woman whose husband murdered her out of jealousy. She considers the idea of doing the same to her husband, or possibly the mistress, thus working out her own jealous emotions. In answer to impertinent questions — impertinent in several senses of the word — I tell people the village is real, it’s exactly like that, the house is there, there’s a small stuffed crocodile and a seraglio couch, there was an old cousin who spent her life embriored her troussée, the Duke really did murder his beautiful wife Glioriale and the chapel he built in formal penitenice but not because he was sorry still stands, though his heart which was buried under its door sill was dug up during the Revolution. These are the details that make the novel work. But whether I actually behaved in this manner is entirely irrelevant to the truth of the book. In fact I chose my plot, of the woman full of anger at her husband’s betrayal, because I wanted to write about the marvellous and terrible story of the Duke’s suspicion, killing the squire he suspected of cuckolding him, shutting up his wife in a tower, then sending her on a pilgrimage through the woods, where masked men jumped out and stopped her litter, and the Duke’s surgeon opened the veins in her wrists and ankles, so she bled to death in the depths of the forest. I considered telling it as a historical novel, as a costume drama, but that’s not my sort of thing, I’m not interested in the vast amount of research it would be necessary to do.

I spent such ages finding out if Glioriale would have slept in sheets — there was not cotton in France at the time, but there was linen, or silk from the weavers of Lyons, whose intricate balconyed apartments one can still visit, or perhaps as in the medieval bedroom tales of Gawaien and the Green Knight — such an effort that small piece of research took, that I was really glad I didn’t have to check up on all the details of clothes and furniture and food and habits.

I tried out the idea of having a present-day character who was a writer living in the village and thinking how you couldn’t write such tales of love and death any more, but it was only when I thought of paralleling the 17th century legend with a contemporary tale of betrayal and jealousy, in this case the infidelity being the husband’s, that I was able to write about it. My putative marital problems are relevant to my biography, I am not this novel. If my books ever make me famous enough somebody might write my life story one day, but it’s very dull.

Of course a number of people have told me they have found my fiction useful in coming to terms with their marital problems, their own narratives of love and betrayal, but that’s a quite other matter.

Publishers are certainly aware of the usefulness of heavily hinting about the true stories in works of fiction. I see from a New York Times article that the absolutely final work of Hemingway, to be published for the centenarly of his birth next year. It’s 38 years since he died, and this manuscript has been around, carved into various chunks for publication, since the last year of his life. This is to be the complete 200 000 words. Hemingway seems to have called it an autobiographical novel, but his publishers will present it as a fictional memoir, to be called True at First Light — but presumably at no other time. I don’t have any problems with autobiographical novels, it’s a norm of the genre, but fictional memoir… I isn’t there something oxymoronic about this?

The New York Times article says that Hemingway’s son reckons he didn’t have the really titillating experience the book describes (which was taking a tribal African woman or two as his wife and all three disporting on a goasktin bed 14 feel wide) then goes on:

But because Hemingway’s adventurous life and his fiction have been so intertwined, the book is sure to raise questions about how much of the story is literally true. Hemingway was elliptical on the issue. All good books have something in common, he liked to say: ‘They are truer than if they had really happened.’

I don’t think he’d have had a bar of fictional memoir.

So what about a fictionalised account of a public event? There’s no problem there. The historical romance that tells the story of Elizabeth 1 or Mary Queen of Scots, describing what they ate and what they thought may to the unsophisticated reader have the weight of fact when it is really only true-seeming that is involved, but a conscious reader knows just what the fictionalisation means. Knows that it is different from history as it can be known. Knows too that the writer sympathetic to Elizabeth is writing a quite different story from a supporter of Mary, that they will take the same facts and turn them into entirely different narratives. The heroine of one is the villain of the other.

When Cassandra Pybus stumbled across the marvellous story of the white rajahs of Sarawak she wrote it as history, as a good yarn certainly but as a product of research and of the facts as they could be ascertained. When her agent tried to sell it to an American publisher the response was, well, it’s very good, it’s a great story but there are such gaps. Well, of course there are, there are gaps because nobody knows what happened in them, there are long periods of silence which can only be recognised as such. If you are sticking to the facts. But Pybus has since made the rather wry discovery that someone has written a book about the same events, called I believe Kaimataatai, but done it as a novel, filling in all the holes and silences, and turning the three Rajahs of Sarawak into one person.

It’s a novel, its author can do that. I haven’t read it, so I don’t know how well it works. But I do know that part of the charm of Pybus’s work is the dialogue it has with the reader about what can be known and what can’t. The writer can invite us to use our own imaginations, and she too can speculate, but none of us can know. Not in history.

And speaking of reducing three characters to one, there is also the possibility of turning one character into five or six. A book that has been the source of enormous controversy is Helen Garner’s first novel. (Pan Masamblin) It has been taken as an account of a love affair at Ormond College, where the master was accused of sexually harassing several female students. The account is fictionalised, in the sense that people’s names have been changed (I was going to say characters’ names have been changed but somehow they aren’t characters, they remain the real people involved but with their names changed) and one person has been split into six, apparently, with the intention of avoiding libel.

The thing about Garner is that she is a superb writer and story teller, so the book has a lot of power. It’s when it is presented as somehow a true account of what happened that’s the problem. Fortunately his friends, who know the answers to these questions, have refused to reveal them; the book is a novel they say, it must be read as such, whether he actually suffered in that way or not is irrelevant, what matters is how well, with what conviction, he tells the story. If you read the articles the journalists finally wrote, you can see their irritation that they couldn’t find out that Condon’s events actually happened; their prurient curiosity was left unsatisfied. Of course they have their suspicions, but so far nobody will confirm them. Hooray, say I.
She was twenty-six years eight months old too young to die thus too astonished, too disbelieving, to scream as the Toyota flew off the road and struck the surface of the near-invisible water as if for an instant it might not sink but float: as if the trajectory of its flight might carry it, the very weight of it, across the water and into the snaky tangle of rushes and stunted trees and vines on the further shore.3

Her name is Kelly Kelleher and she is travelling with The Senator to get to the ferry in Brockden’s Landing. The connection to the Kennedy family’s real life scandal is the reader’s; of course Joyce Carol Oates knows we will make it, intends us to make it, but the responsibility is ours. She is a musician writing variations on a theme that life has already played.

Sometimes when I talk to people about the first stone they say to me But it’s a piece of journalism, Garner is a terrific journalist and she is certainly that but the book is not a piece of journalism, it’s a novel whose main character is Garner, acting out the role of journalist, following in fact the classical form of the whodunit and that’s okay if it is how it is read but I suspect it is seen as a simple factual account, telling the truth that the situation holds. You only have to consider how different the book might have been had the two girls talked to her to see that, if the book does tell the truth, it is only one of many.

I find it curious that our generation is so preoccupied with the real when it is in fact so vague about the truth. Is it to do with reality becoming virtual? But then, it always was. Whenever you read powerful words on a page they transported you into their own reality, and your imagination did a much better job than the clumsy special effects that are so admired in movies like Independence Day, which I saw on an aeroplane and thought Oh good now I can see those special effects that people rave about, people like my son who say Yes of course it’s a crummy movie in terms of plot and character but the destruction of the city is just brilliant. I can do it in my mind with a good book much better than that.

Maybe it’s because we live in an age where fakery is endemic that we are so obsessed with fact. Digital cameras, computer editing … the camera lies so easily. It always did, but in more imaginative ways. With ideas, rather than facts. And in the latter case you could tell, technically, you could see the edges of the scissor and paste job, the wires that held the cut out fairies at the bottom of the garden.

And then there is the Internet. Jonathan Miller, writing in the Guardian, says it ‘is a web of lies’. Not everything on the Internet is false, of course — but separating the mendacious from the veracious is rapidly becoming impossible … The technology of OWeb crawlers[O] itself creates an open field for hoaxes, lies, conspiracy theorists, political extremists, people offering dubious financial propositions, and pornographers.’ He goes on to quote an American investigative journalist called David Weir saying ‘We live in an age of news too fresh to have to be true.’ And Matt Drudge, whose Drudge Report is a web site and electronic mailing list serving up scandal, gossip and anything scurrilous it can find coming out of the Chinese whispers of daily American life, with the Lewinsky affair effecting a kind of apotheosis of rumour-mongering. Drudge reckons: ‘All truths begin as hearsay as far as I’m concerned.’

Drudge, Miller tells us, ‘looks like the future. On the Internet it has become more important to be cool, than true.’

I recommend we stick with novels. You know where you are with fiction. But then, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it. Marion Halligan delivered this paper as the keynote address at the 1998 September Tasmanian Readers’ and Writers’ Festival. The latest publication by this acclaimed Australian novelist is The Golden Dress, Viking. This essay was funded by the Literature Fund of the Australia Council.

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