

# New Ideas in the Writing Arts



# New Ideas in the Writing Arts

Edited by

Graeme Harper

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P U B L I S H I N G

New Ideas in the Writing Arts, Edited by Graeme Harper

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4907-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4907-4

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My warm thanks to the writers who have contributed chapters to *New Ideas in the Writing Arts*. It has been a genuine pleasure to work with each and all of you! Sincere thanks also to colleagues at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, whose support, encouragement and belief in this project have been wonderful. Thanks to the many fine friends and colleagues around the world – not least for the energy and the enthusiasm that constantly reminds me real progress is always the product of an open collaborative spirit, informed by an understanding of the past, borne out of an active engagement with the present, and formed in a strong commitment to the future. Finally, my love and thanks to Louise, and to our sons Myles and Tyler.





# NEW IDEAS IN THE WRITING ARTS: AN INTRODUCTION

GRAEME HARPER

## **Tyrannies of Newness**

In a letter of the 7 November 1913 to the Editor of *Poetry* the future Nobel Laureate W.B. Yeats wrote:

Why not give the £40, or a portion of it, to Ezra Pound? I suggest him to you because, though I do not really like with my whole soul the metrical experiments he has made for you, I think those experiments show a most vigorous imaginative mind. (Parisi & Young: 81)

While Yeats's 'whole soul' was not moved enough to give unqualified support to Pound's work, he was obviously as impressed as he needed to be by Pound's 'vigorous imaginative mind' to make a case for paying Pound what was, at that time, a substantial payment. He goes on to explore why he makes this pitch to the editor, Harriet Monroe:

He [Pound] is certainly a creative personality of some sort, though it is too soon yet to say what sort. His experiments are perhaps errors, I am not certain; but I would always sooner give the laurel to vigorous error than to any orthodoxy not inspired. (Parisi & Young: 81)

We could spend several books exploring what is contained in these short letter extracts: Yeats the writer; Pound and that 'vigorous imaginative mind'; issues of taste; ideals concerning poetry; the relationship between editors and writers; questions about how the imagination works; what does or does not constitute 'experiment'; the notion of a 'creative personality'; the history and conditions of orthodoxy, or what such a thing might be at any one time or in any one place.

Such an introduction is not to suggest here that this book, *New Writing in the Writing Arts*, is itself Poundian in approach – well, Poundian from a Yeatsian point of view, that is, and therefore all about experiment! Rather it is to say that the word "new" in any title brings us to the question of "So, what's new about it?" and (beyond the connected question 'Do you mean

“experimental’?) this most obviously leads to a key enquiry along the lines of “Why should I care?”

Newness, simply by happening, should not and does not wield cardinal power. Such would do little to recognize the lessons of the past and less still to affirm the longitudinal strength of truths confirmed and confirmed again by meeting challenges and satisfying alternative viewpoints. But, of course, “new” is a description not solely applied to the recently discovered but also to the novel. New can be the “introduced” or the “fresh”. We can introduce something without declaring it paramount or superior and we can discuss fresh ideas without claiming they are the sole possessors of a truth or truths.

In these senses, *New Ideas in the Writing Arts* exists because recent events have occurred in the way in which we explore Creative Writing in educational settings. Things have been introduced, fresh notions have emerged. I admit I would personally often refer to these as “developments”, but that word I know points to a kind of disciplinary or epistemological politics that reflects on how we have managed knowledge in our modern universities and colleges. Avoiding the overtly political, I will thus avoid the word development and suggest only the word new, new as in introduced, new as in fresh – fresh in idea, fresh in voice, perhaps even fresh in attitude.

Of course, returning to the Yeats quote might direct a reader to ask if as editor of this book, and in seeking newness, I too “would always sooner give the laurel to vigorous error than to any orthodoxy not inspired” (81). The answer is probably that I would. However, I believe what you will find in this book is more inspiration than error and more vigorous pursuit than languid orthodoxy. Of course, what orthodoxy in Creative Writing research is at this point in history remains wide open to interpretation. That is another reason for undertaking this book project.

The worldwide growth of Creative Writing as a formal subject of study in universities and colleges has generated explorations that today are only at the tip of a greater range and depth of explorations that promise to be undertaken. So the answer to the question “Why should I care?” is simple enough. That is, the ideas in this book have been largely generated, directly or indirectly, because of something that has happened in relatively recent times, something that gives every indication of continuing to happen and, most likely, to continue to grow. Such an increase in human interest and involvement surely means we should care. Of course, we must confront the possibility – as indeed Yeats confronted this possibility when making his suggestion to the editor of *Poetry* that she should be paying

Ezra Pound for his poetry – the possibility that we are parading the Emperor’s new clothes.

I do not believe this to be the case. When titling this book “New Ideas in the Writing Arts” it was not intended it would indicate expert testimony set before readers and then an insistence that they (i.e. you!) recognize that these ideas are new. Rather, the intention is to say we should consider what might be new, what might be explored or in need of exploration, what might be introduced to a reader who has not thought of investigating certain aspects of Creative Writing or of undertaking Creative Writing in a certain way. On this basis, such freshness might produce a development in a reader’s own work, in a reader’s own thinking. At present, our field is at the tip of something: a 21<sup>st</sup> century development of research in Creative Writing undertaken by creative writers through writing practice and through a critical engagement with Creative Writing that begins in writing practice, recognizes and explores the elements of it, and is pursued because of it.

## **The Writing Arts: Creative Writing**

Noting the ancient origins of writing, sociolinguist Florian Coulmas comments that the “where, when, how and why writing originated are questions of foremost importance to students of various disciplines” (Coulmas: 376). Those considering Creative Writing, which is itself ancient, are faced with additional questions of how this particular kind of writing emerged, why and where it emerged, and what role it has occupied for individuals and for communities - not only as a mode of communication but as an art.

When looking at Creative Writing more closely we can certainly wonder how the ‘creative’ relates to any suggestion of a writing ‘system’, systems being something that a linguist such as Coulmas focuses upon but not something those who have undertaken or studied Creative Writing have considered regularly or, sometimes, much at all. We are doubly drawn to speculate if the individuality of a great deal of Creative Writing asks for alternative methods of investigation to the modes of investigation adopted with regard to writing whose primary objective is clarity of message or efficiency of exchange or universality of meaning. None of these things might be of significance for the creative writer or the audience for Creative Writing. None of them might be relevant in Creative Writing or relevant in the same way as they are in other forms of writing. In which case, what exactly *is* significant about the writing arts when those writing

arts can alternatively be called “Creative Writing”? That becomes the key question.

Certainly it is possible that systemic analysis has no place in Creative Writing examination, and that the role of the creative is in fact to challenge the systematic at its core and according to its obvious assumption that all writing has to be in some sense systematic. Creative Writing might appear to be like other writing systems, might even employ the linguistic characteristics of other writing, and yet use some of that common appearance to subvert our assumptions. It might be that the genre we locate in our generally agreed definitions of Creative Writing are material evidence of ways of thinking and feeling that situate this kind of written communication in a part of the human brain, or a part of the human psyche for that matter, that resists our analytical capabilities and turns us to faculties and concepts such as the imagination, emotion or spirit that have long left the materiality of many of our intellectual enterprises looking partially adequate - even, on occasion, bewildered.

And yet as Florian Coulmas declares, a little over-enthusiasm notwithstanding, writing is of “foremost importance to students of various disciplines” and here we are in the broadest sense of the term as students of Creative Writing. Students who have to believe in what we do in order to do it, but in believing also confirm certain kinds of knowledge and acknowledge, whether explicitly or implicitly, that we need to explore our knowledge in order to be as sure as we can be about it and accomplish what we seek to accomplish as creative writers.

This is somewhat to challenge the Platonic notion that knowledge and belief are separate venues – separate not just as notions or thoughts but separate in their address to legitimacy in that knowledge is at very least attempting to be infallible while belief is by its nature fallible. Notably, the fact that so much evidence points to the need for a belief in the human practice of Creative Writing in order for a writer to be able to undertake it suggests that in our field it is not the question of whether belief is contained in knowledge but what kinds of knowledge are contained in the practice of Creative Writing.

In that key sense, we must come up with a new way of defining Creative Writing that incorporates a theory of belief. This requires a critical examination of how we come to gain knowledge about Creative Writing and how we explore this knowledge in light of such a theory of belief in Creative Writing.

## **Belief in Creative Writing**

Though Creative Writing is not a writing system located primarily in clarity of exchange or in its efficiency of communication, we have developed it, embraced it and supported it over thousands of years, and despite the many other forms of communication available to us today we continue to do so. Creative Writing's personalizing of understanding to the extent that vast amounts of interpretative power have been expended on endeavoring to explore the nature of various works of Creative Writing, only to recognize that such an endeavor often mostly generates yet more interpretation, would surely have long ago seen it fall by the way as clearer forms of communication became favored.

Of course, Creative Writing is an art so the fact that it might not offer the clearest or the simplest mode of written communication is not necessarily an issue. But, as such an art, how might we situate it? Creative Writing is not often remotely the visualizing stimulating art we see on the canvas or presented in film. It is not the aurally stimulating art of music. It doesn't provide function and beauty strategically combined in the ways we might admire in architecture or design, and it is not the often mimetic art of the theatre. What then of this art that uses something as commonplace as words, but that does not often use them plainly and that does not offer for our human senses other types of direct stimulus?

The response to this mystery is commonly to talk of the role of the imagination in providing something like a filling in of gaps in pieces of Creative Writing as they seek to relate or evoke and can only do so in ways that ask for our personal effort to bring them into more complete being. The argument goes that this insistence on effort, this need of an audience's own creative participation, is a substantial component of the attraction to works of Creative Writing. In some ways, then, the audience is assisting in 'writing' the works and in certain ways also the exchange between writer and audience becomes a mutual one. The same might be said, of course, of any connotative situation provided by any art and the notion is that such participation provides opportunities for human empathy, along with aspects of personalizing even in art forms that are consumed in a mass human experience. That attraction to art, especially forms that are not heaviest on types of mimesis, is based in a good part on how art brings us to understanding of ourselves, our individuality, and relates this to a shared community of ideas, emotions, personalities, histories and much more.

But let's return to the issue at hand. If Creative Writing is inefficient as a form of communication – compared, at least, to other forms of written

communication – and if it often relies on a high degree of participatory imaginative involvement from its consumer, why has it been embraced so consistently even when variation in commitment to the arts has struck one community or another over time, even when reading was not always a widely held skill, even when other arts choices emerged that could combine similar psychological, personalized attractions but with more appeal to such strong senses as those associated with human sight and sound? Indeed, it could be said our making and consuming of music has also had a similar long history; but music is so very different as a form of communication to Creative Writing, if music can even rightly be discussed in the same way as communication. Creative Writing is unique in *how* we have embraced it and, I would suggest, it is unique in *why* we have embraced it.

It seems obvious when as creative writers we explore the nature of the artefacts of Creative Writing – those finished works of Creative Writing that are the most commonly exchanged material evidence of us having undertaken Creative Writing – that not only do we need to believe in Creative Writing in order to undertake it we also instill in its artefacts forms of belief. In other words, a novel, a poem, a script contains versions of belief that are part of the exchange between a writer and a reader or audience. Such things as veracity with regard to historical or other facts, empathy in the depiction of persons and personalities, concern for the nature and intention of human memory -- these can be included in this persistence of belief. None of this would have the same impact on our embracing of the art/communication that is Creative Writing if not that it is presented in the written word, which we otherwise use in commonplace ways, and very consciously so. Compared to other writing, Creative Writing more vigorously asks for our participation as readers or audience in order for the exchange between writer and consumer to be complete.

Belief, therefore, is fundamental to Creative Writing. The knowledge contained within it, while personalized, has greater value than it would otherwise have because we understand it to be knowledge *instilled* with belief and, though individual, it is also thought to carry some widely held human truths and understandings. We do not reject works of Creative Writing as truth providers because they are the products of one mind, as often they are, or because they reflect one set of perhaps disorderly experiences. We do not take creative writers to task because the information contained within their works does not hold up to the same modes of assessment as we might apply to the hard sciences or the social sciences – quite the opposite: we find them to provide productive human knowledge. The aesthetics of the artefacts of Creative Writing, though

reliant on sensory invocation rather direct sensory stimulus, are considered to be informed by belief – so that a textual form reflects a concept or an ideal however much that form is dependent on the interpretative and imaginative power of the receiver. And, though works of Creative Writing do not seek to be so clear as to be purely informational they nevertheless are thought to contain a commitment to words as complex human tools, and to most fully exploit that recognized word power for greater human understanding.

Creative Writing is, thus, an art of belief, a communication medium dependent on belief, and a form of writing in which belief is far more complete as an exchange and as an ideal than it is in any other writing. While other writing systems - leaving aside here a discussion of whether Creative Writing *is* a system – reference belief, are sometimes even dependent on belief (think of safety notices, legal communication, journalism, for example, and their dependence on displaying believable authority) Creative writing is situated so completely in the incorporation of belief within knowledge that such a thing could be said to be integral to its understanding and its consuming. Unlike Samuel Taylor Coleridge's suggestion of a 'willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge: 5), where the onus is on the reader and the creative writer uses structural and formal methods to encourage this 'suspension of disbelief', the suggestion here is that belief (not, in fact, suspension of anything) is itself the driver behind Creative Writing, a primary aspect of it; and that, rather than a one-sided suspension or even a formal manipulation, Creative Writing is a practice founded on human belief and producing a range of evidence of our shared human beliefs.

## What Follows?

What follows here in *New Ideas in the Writing Arts* are explorations of Creative Writing, fresh from explorers of Creative Writing who have incorporated into their work ideas discovered in creative practice and ideas explored critically because of creative practice. Naturally, I would also say that these are chapters borne in the sharing of individual experiences, founded in a belief in Creative Writing, and offered openly because of the enthusiasm of the writers for Creative Writing and the creative and critical knowledge contained within it. Individual readers could favor one chapter over another because of a chapter's content, theme or style. Similarly, a reader might feel one chapter is 'stronger' than another because of how its writer expresses an idea or ideal, or because of the experiences its writer draws upon. In an international discussion of Creative Writing – and of

Creative Writing drawn from experiences in and around a range of universities and colleges – such variations are an indication of the current state of play. Maybe this state of play will change, maybe it will not. Authors were asked to consider including a ‘summary’ or ‘further discussion/reading’ section at the end of their chapters; some did, some didn’t, and all who did used this section slightly differently. I suggested that ‘keywords’ might be included. Some included them, some didn’t. The guiding principle here has been not to create uniformity or conformity, working on the belief that to put a bulldozer through such a landscape does little to reveal its natural appearance. The aim was not to create a book largely written by an editor but an edited book with room for individual decisions, voices and approaches.

This is not meant to be a mainstream textbook; but I do not take the work here to be ‘experimental’ either - though you will find some experimental activities, some aspects of theorizing and testing or exploring of hypotheses about Creative Writing. You’ll discover that in the tone and trajectory of the chapters there is a serious engagement with how to determine current knowledge, how to confirm or challenge that knowledge, and broadly how to progress our knowledge of Creative Writing.

Practical considerations prevail, and there is a clear sense in which Creative Writing is an activity, not a static thing to be examined in a fixed state and discussed as a completed object. Rather, Creative Writing in these chapters is both a range of events and their results, a human activity that draws on many individual actions, cultural and historical contexts and, in its undertaking, presents evidence that reflects on the knowledge and belief that informs and produces it.

## References

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# CHAPTER ONE

## PUBLICATION AND THE PhD

### LIAM MURRAY BELL

#### **Abstract**

During the 2011/12 academic year, two years into my doctoral studies, the novel that forms the central focus of my Creative Writing PhD at the University of Surrey, *So It Is*, was accepted for publication. This chapter will examine the ways in which commercial publication altered and modified the critical-creative project, which revolves around investigating the role of women in the violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Discussing the ‘process’ of writing *So It Is* within an academic setting, this chapter will examine whether the ‘product’ of publication in June 2012 altered the original research aims of the PhD and, further, whether the narrative itself was modified by the commercial editorial process. Through self-reflexive examination of issues such as settling on a title, editing to suit both academic and commercial practice, the relationship between form and content within the novel, and the usefulness of reviews as a means to assess the success of the critical-creative doctoral project, the chapter discusses working between two institutions: the university and the publishing industry.

#### **The Project**

In 2009 I started a PhD project at the University of Surrey to investigate literature of the Troubles period in Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup> with a view towards writing a novel-length narrative that reimagined the role of women in the violence. As a Creative Writing doctorate, it followed the National Association in Writers benchmark statement from 2008, which states that Creative Writing research comprises “both research *into content* and research *into form*” (NAWE, 2008, emphasis in original). As such, the critical component of my doctoral studies revolves around analysis of

previous literary texts from the Troubles period and previous representations of women in the conflict – to provide context for the content of the novel – and exploration of different narrative techniques and structures that could be used in the writing of the novel – engaging with the form. This led to the writing of a novel, *So It Is*, that employs a split narrative perspective, between the coming-of-age story of Aoife Brennan in 1980s Belfast and the thriller narrative of a Republican paramilitary, Cassie, who operates in the years after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Part of the reason for this structure, of course, was a desire to draw the reader into the plot and to lead them to speculate about the linkage between the two narratives, conforming to Terry Eagleton's discussion of 'suspense':

if a story breaks off and begins again, switches constantly from one narrative level to another and delays its climax to keep us in suspense... our engagement with it may be intensified. (Eagleton, 2000, 4)

However, as well as this purpose, the split narrative also tied the form of the novel to the content, as will be explored in more detail below, in order to augment the concerns of the narrative through the structures used. The split narrative, then, served both the Bakhtinian ideal of "maintaining a perfect balance" (Todorov, 1984, 35) between form and content in a poststructuralist frame<sup>2</sup>, an overtly academic concern, and the commercial concern with writing a novel that enthralls the reader, drawing them into the storyworld and engaging with their "tension-filled desire to know [the] outcome" of the story (Herman et al., 2005, 578).

On the 16<sup>th</sup> November 2011, just over two years into my doctoral studies, the novel that forms the creative part of the PhD was acquired by Myriad Editions for publication in summer 2012. Graeme Harper writes that Creative Writing comprises "perception, memory and action first, and... object and result second" (Harper, 2010, xvi) and it will be useful to consider this chapter in those terms, in that the former is the 'process' of writing, whilst the latter is subject to the influences and modifications of the publisher as the book is developed towards 'product'. The discussion above, outlining the reasons for employing a split narrative perspective and the research into both content and form, places the 'process' of writing as primary, with the physical artefact, the 'product', being a secondary (although desired) outcome. This formulation, however, was altered by the impending publication of the novel and the input of editor and copy-editor, as will be discussed below. This chapter will examine how the process of writing a Creative Writing PhD is impacted upon by the prospect of the creative work becoming a product, with self-reflexive examination of the

negotiations and compromises made in order to ensure that the project functioned as both a viable Postgraduate research dissertation and a commercially published novel.

### What's in a name?

One of the first queries raised by the publisher was the book's title. Since the beginning of the PhD I had been using the working title *rubber bullet, broken glass*. This ties in with the plot of the novel, in that 'rubber bullet' alludes to the shooting of Aoife's brother, Damien, at a riot in Chapter 7 and 'broken glass' references the method of bodily violence used by Cassie in her honeytrap operations<sup>3</sup>. It was questioned by the publisher, however, on the basis of whether it was memorable enough for commercial publication. W.P James, in an article entitled 'On the naming of novels', suggests that a chosen title should "arrest attention and whet appetite" (James, 2001) and whilst I would argue that *rubber bullet, broken glass* did 'whet appetite' – at least to the extent that it hinted at the plot of the novel – my editor felt that this title was too cumbersome to 'arrest attention' if seen in a bookshop or when scanning through a list of published titles. So we began to consider other options.

There is a common assumption, also discussed by James, that "an accomplished book might be trusted to name itself" (James, 2001) but the fact that I had written the novel with the previous title in mind, and that the title itself was intrinsically bound to my conception of the plot, meant that I found it difficult to conceive of the novel by any other name. Below are some of the rejected suggestions listed in my notebook:

*Aoife*  
*The Beginning of Tenderness*  
*Where Youth and Laughter Go*  
*The Dirty Protest*  
*Writing on the Wall*

It is worth noting some of the reasons for rejecting these, although the process was largely a subjective one. Firstly, *Aoife* was decided against because, whilst simple, there seemed to be few people who knew how to pronounce the name (ee-fah) and because it made no reference to the second story strand centred on the Cassie character. *The Beginning of Tenderness* is a line in the novel itself (Bell, 2012, 328) but in isolation it brought to mind the 'chick-lit' genre and didn't point towards the brutal context of the Troubles. *Where Youth and Laughter Go* is a line from Siegfried Sassoon's 'Suicide in the Trenches' (1917) and also appears on a

gable-end mural in the novel (Bell, 2012, 8), however it was deemed to be too well-known in its original context and therefore likely to give the impression of a novel focused on the First World War. The Troubles were more directly evoked by *The Dirty Protest*, a no-wash protest among Republican prisoners in both the H-Blocks of Long Kesh Prison and the Armagh Women's Prison in the late Seventies and early Eighties that was a precursor to the 1981 Hunger Strikes, however I was reluctant to use it due to the fact that this specific historical reference is only fleetingly alluded to in the novel, mainly through the figures of Bobby Sands and Mairéad Farrell. The final title listed, *Writing on the Wall*, alluded to the murals of Belfast, and hence the setting, whilst also giving a flavour of the plot due to the fact that Damien takes to writing on the wall in the months after he is injured. However, here we came up against a further difficulty that James identifies, that of being able to "hit upon a title which has not already been used" (James, 2001) as this title, or variations of it, had already been used for a couple of novels, a modern art textbook and Will Hutton's discussion of the relationship between China and the West (Hutton, 2008). The title *So It Is*, then, appealed for a number of reasons: firstly, it gave an impression of the setting through a piece of dialect that is uniquely Northern Irish and tied neatly with the dialect-inflected narrative voice I had researched through texts such as Milroy (1981), Hughes & Trudgill (1987), and Henry (1995); secondly, it gave an insight into the obdurate perspective of the second character, the paramilitary Cassie, who is uncompromising in following her repeated mantra of "*fuck you and yours, for all you've done*" (Bell, 2012, 251); and, thirdly, it was short and memorable enough to both 'arrest attention and whet appetite', as per the earlier James quote.

As detailed above, the amount of effort and negotiation involved in deciding on the title – which Monika Fludernik denotes as a 'paratext' in that it's part of the book but not part of the 'internal structure' of the story (Fludernik, 2009, 23-4) – is indicative of the effect that the publication had on the creative work, with further refinements made in terms of the historical detail used, the ways in which form worked in conjunction with content and, as below, the editing of the narrative.

### **With a red pen in hand**

The process of editing, at PhD level, is a collaborative process between student and supervisor that requires intricate discussion of elements such as methodology and the use of literary theory in conjunction with the development of the written work. The influence of poststructuralist,

feminist and narrative theory was vital to the critical aims of my own project – allowing for an intertextual literature review, an analysis of the role of women in the Troubles period and an examination of the narrative structures and techniques used in *So It Is* – however this critical frame was removed in the context of commercial publication. My editor at Myriad Editions, Victoria Blunden, was both sympathetic and knowledgeable about the critical context of the work, but the primary concern became refining and developing the novel towards the final creative product.

Having been involved in workshops at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, I was well aware of the importance of revision and editing; with the “ultimate aim” of such a process, as Andrew Cowan argues, being to “place ourselves in the position of our eventual readers, so that we may gauge the likely effects of our words on them” (Cowan, 2011, 179). However, the detail and precision of the line-edits undertaken by a professional editor went far beyond my own editing practices or, indeed, the suggestions and alterations made in supervision meetings. For example, in the passage in *So It Is* in which Damien attempts suicide (Bell, 2012, 188-195) it was suggested by my editor that the language detailing the movements of his mother Cathy, who is strung out on tranquilisers and hence doesn’t realise what is happening, be altered slightly as per the strikethroughs below:

As his groans became whimpers, his writhing curled him into the foetal position and his eyelids fluttered shut, Cathy followed suit and calmly lowered herself to the ground to lie directly behind him; ~~replicating his murmurs for help.~~

As they lay there, mother and son, ~~one in pain and one pretending,~~ some faint instinct caused Cathy to reach out an arm to cradle her dying son.

(from draft of *So It Is*, 10/02/2012)

The two phrases highlighted gave more agency to Cathy than I had intended, they indicated that she was, to a degree, aware of what was happening to her son – especially the word ‘pretending’. By trimming the passage in order to have the character mirroring the movements of her son but without additional sound or movement other than ‘to reach out an arm to cradle her dying son’, the impact of the final line was heightened and the extent to which Cathy is unable to process exactly what is happening becomes apparent. My own edits, in a previous draft, had acknowledged the potential for the section to read as though Cathy was negligent and therefore to invite judgement on the part of the reader – I removed ‘as his

mammy watched on' from an earlier version – and I had also cut the lines to make them as taut as possible – removing 'his arms splayed out to the sides' from an earlier draft – but the attention to detail required in working through the narrative with a professional editor was hugely beneficial.

A vital concern about this editing process, however, was that it didn't infringe or weaken the critical concerns of the PhD project as a whole. The passage above engages with the impact of the Troubles violence on individual lives, as seen in Damien's suicide attempt, and also highlights the widespread practice, that Monica McWilliams notes, of the pressures of the conflict leading women to "respond by using tranquilisers or [by] smoking excessively" (McWilliams, 1991, 92). This has been noted in novels from the period, for instance in Mary Beckett's *Give Them Stones* in which some of the women are "hardly able to make words come out of their mouths" (Beckett, 1988, 134) or Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* in which the mother speaks in "remarks separated by days, weeks, months" (Deane, 1997, 145) because of the pills, and it was central to my desire to represent the experience of women during the Troubles. The changes made above, then, allowed for the character's movements to become more plausible and for the passage to be tightened, without removing or diluting this aspect of the research.

There were also various larger rewrites undertaken as a result of the input of both editor and copy-editor, Linda McQueen, but again these offered the opportunity of strengthening the critical concerns of the narrative rather than weakening them. The copy-editor drew up a complex and daunting chart that documented the passing of time in the novel and ensured that the structure correctly mapped onto the historical detail and character ages; in Genette's narratological formulation this would be ensuring that both 'story-time' and 'narrative-time' worked (Genette, 1980), with the former being the chronological structure of events and the latter being the events as narrated. The chart showed that there was an anomaly in the novel, in that the narrative time, as given by presentation of both character and plot, between Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 showed a logical progression from Damien becoming involved in rioting through to his injuries sustained at a Twelfth of July protest, but the story time, as given by historical detail and character age, showed that a full year was missing. Events from summer 1990 were followed by a passage from summer 1991, and the later time-frame of the novel depended on this being maintained. As a result, I added an additional section (Bell, 2012, 117-123) which included historical events from early in 1990. The benefit of this rewrite was that it allowed me to compare the situation in Northern

Ireland with apartheid South Africa, which Aoife learns of from her teacher Mr O'Toole:

‘The African National Congress is Sinn Féin,’ he jabbed. ‘And the Spear of the Nation is the Irish Republican Army. And Mandela is Gerry Adams, and President de Klerk is Margaret Thatcher. And the British...’ he paused before swiping out ‘...are always the fucking British.’ (Bell, 2012, 120)

This section, which deals with the period up to the release of Nelson Mandela on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1990, became more than a passage to ‘plug the gap’ between the two riot scenes. Instead it allowed me to further a concern with gesturing towards historical fact in *So It Is* as a way of situating the narrative in time, but also as a means of relating it to contemporary social and political discourses. In this way, the novel was able to make reference back to “the external world”, outside the narrative form itself, “which no longer include[s] narratives only but elements of another substance (historical facts, determinations, behaviors etc.)” (Barthes, 1975, 264-5). It is likely that the majority of readers will have some conception of apartheid South Africa, and so the ability to portray the character’s conception, from within the Nationalist community, that there is a close relation between the two contexts is valuable for the creative work and also allows, as above, for a furthering of the poststructural concern with tying the narrative to external events to deepen its engagement with political and social discourses.

On the face of it, the editorial process might seem like a focused interrogation of the creative work that either ignores or, potentially, weakens the critical research undertaken – into both content, as above, and form, as will be explored below – but it is possible to use the “fresh eye” (Cowan, 2011, 179) of the editor and copy-editor to find elements that can be refined to better fit with the research undertaken or, indeed, to find space for insertion of material that might otherwise have been lost.

## Form and Content

One of the key aspects of the doctoral project, one of the claims to originality in the thesis, was representing the discourses of gender and violence within the Troubles period not only through the content of the novel, but also through the form. Bakhtinian theory, according to Todorov, “asserts the necessity of finding a link between the two”, by augmenting the central concerns of the narrative through the narrative structures and strategies used, and “taking both into account simultaneously”, rather than using the structure of the novel as merely a frame or a support to carry the

story (Todorov, 1984, 35). To remove this from an abstract concept, it is possible to consider the difference in length and even print-type between the two narratives in *So It Is*. The Aoife narrative is formed of consistent third-person passages, focalized through the ‘reflector’ figure of the protagonist from a ‘subsequent’ narrative position<sup>4</sup>. It is the principal narrative, occupying the majority of the novel and presenting a state of normalcy and projecting a status-quo – for both characters and setting – that is then interrupted by the shorter, sharper sections of the Cassie narrative, formed of first-person ‘scenes’ from the point-of-view of the “experiencing-self” of Cassie (Fludernik, 2009, 90)<sup>5</sup>. These sections are flash fictions, never more than five-hundred words in length, and are presented in italics, which are used as a means to “render volume or pitch” (Fludernik, 2009, 23). In this way the Cassie sections are akin to the Provisional IRA use of the “one-shot wonder” (Feldman, 1991, 121) as a tactic against the British Army during the Troubles conflict, whereby a lone sniper would take a single shot at a passing patrol, not only in the hopes of inflicting injury but also as a way of instigating panic among the soldiers. This practice has been alluded to in fiction of the Troubles period before – for instance in Jennifer Johnston’s *Shadows on Our Skin*, “The soldiers ran for cover. Their boots must have been sending sparks in all directions, Joe thought. He’d seen that happen before” (Johnston, 2002, 63); or in Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*, “The IRA gunmen, on the roof or at the top-floor windows, fired single-shots, each one like a match flare against the sky” (Deane, 1997, 35) – but *So It Is* sees an attempt to incorporate the practice into the form of the novel as well. Thus, the dogmatic and violent voice of Cassie interrupts the calm and considered perspective of Aoife and, thereby, produces what David Lodge terms a “resistance... to the dominance of any one discourse” (Lodge, 1990, 22) by disputing the stable gender and power constructs portrayed in the main narrative. Women in the Troubles context are often “idealised as the emotional guardians of hearth, home and for children’s upbringing and morality” (Baillie, 2002, 124), with the result that women who do engage directly in the violence “become anomalies... co-opted into either defending male interests or acting like men, that is, being not quite women” (Aretxaga, 1997, 10), however the presence of the female paramilitary character of Cassie disputes this gender construct and asks the reader to re-examine their perceptions of the role of women in the conflict. As above, this is done not only through the content of the flash fictions, but also through the form itself and the italics used to present these sections.



This usage of form was integral to the critical-creative project and was produced, fully realised, in the final novel. However, there was a negotiation required with regards to another of the methods of tying form to content. The apparent disconnect – both in terms of tone and the narrative technique outlined above – between the Aoife and the Cassie narrative derives from a point of fracture in Chapter 7 of *So It Is*. This traumatic event is the maiming of Damien and it is not only the event that is worthy of examination but also the form chosen to portray it (Bell, 2012, 135). Presented in prose poetry akin to Ciaran Carson’s *Belfast Confetti* (Carson, 1989) or Edwin Morgan’s snapshot-style Instamatic Poetry, such as ‘5<sup>th</sup> December 1971’ (Morgan, 1996), the passage uses the poetic device of enjambment as a means of representing how Aoife, unable to process events, steps back from the violence and examines the scene objectively by focusing on details, such as the spilt milk, which are highlighted by the line breaks within the passage:

The boy has his mouth open, ready to shout as he turns – body twisted – ready to run. The milk bottle in his hand arcs upwards – spilt milk curves to form an empty speech bubble.  
(from draft of *So It Is*, 10/02/2012)

This can be read as a technique that ties the form of the narrative to the events depicted, providing a practical example of Brian McHale’s theory that the “spatial displacement of words... produces other displacements” with the overall effect of “disrupting the reality of the projected world” (McHale, 2001, 181). Set apart from the prose paragraphs, the injury sustained by Damien does not lead to a complete rupturing of the narrative, but it strains the constructs and thus represents the trauma inflicted upon Aoife in that moment. In the published novel, however, the physical page dimensions (129 x 198mm) meant that these line lengths, used to build towards the point at which the shot is fired, couldn’t be maintained without switching to a smaller font size or altering the lines substantially. Therefore, a decision had to be made as to whether the prose poetry should be kept with amendments, to meet the critical concerns of the doctoral project, or removed to fit with the commercially produced novel. My editor’s preference was to rework the passage into a prose paragraph consistent with the rest of the narrative, however my desire to maintain this element, a key facet of the critical thesis, led to a compromise that saw the passage substantially changed:

The boy has his mouth open, ready to shout as he turns  
 – body twisted – ready  
 to run. The milk bottle in his hand arcs upwards –  
 spilt milk curves  
 to form an empty speech bubble.

(Bell, 2012, 135)

This was a wholly necessary change and it maintained the concern with using the “disposition of space on the printed page” (Herman, 2009, 107) as a way of representing the experience of the protagonist. The line lengths no longer got progressively shorter – sharpened to a point – as the moment of the shot being fired was approached, however the powerful images within the passage, such as ‘ – body twisted – ’ and ‘spilt milk curves’ were emphasised by being resituated on new lines and the shift in narrative form, with the implication that the events are too immediate for the character to give a subjective or emotional reaction, was able to be included in the creative work.

This is representative of the experience of tweaking and altering the creative text in order to meet the critical concerns of the doctoral project and also the commercial concerns of my publisher, and it is necessary to note how supportive Myriad Editions were of the innovative elements. Indeed, their logistical expertise in developing the handwritten lists used in Book II of the novel was invaluable. As a publisher of graphic novels as well as prose fiction, they were able to take the handwritten lists that I used to represent the list of victims that Cassie is targeting and transpose them directly into the text (Bell, 2012, 255), without the need to revert to handwriting font or similar, which would have exposed the artifice of the construct. As will be discussed in the conclusion, the benefit of publishing a novel originating from an academic project with an independent publisher is that innovation and originality is generally encouraged and supported.

## Reviews and Reflections

Commercial publication of *So It Is* presented a further benefit for the doctoral project, which was the opportunity to gauge reaction to the creative work through reviews and, thereby, to assess whether the critical aims and objectives of the thesis were borne out in the novel. At the time of writing, the novel *So It Is* has received a total of eight reviews in print and online media, an author profile in *The Observer* which described the book as one which “offers a fresh perspective on the Troubles” (Kappala-Ramsamy, 2012), and interviews in *The Irish Post* and on *BBC Radio*

*Scotland*. Below, I will use some of these reviews of the ‘product’ to reflect back on the ‘process’ of writing.

This confident debut novel alternates between the two characters and invites us to speculate on the connection between them (the truth of which is tantalisingly deferred). (Evans, 2012)

This review, from *The Financial Times*, usefully engaged with the split narrative perspective discussed at the beginning of the chapter, noting that the switching back-and-forth between the two narratives created suspense and intrigue. The review further notes that the Aoife sections are “beautifully handled” with moments of “humour and warmth” (Evans, 2012), which points towards the emotive coming-of-age story. Indeed, a review on the *Culture NI* website also made reference to “the reflective, keenly observed narrative” of Aoife, but then notes that this “morphs into a straight thriller” as the Cassie narrative emerges (Peto, 2012). As discussed above, the juxtaposition of these two storylines is used to build a composite picture of the role of women in the violence of the Troubles and, although the review is critical of the degree to which the thriller narrative takes over, there is at least an acknowledgement that the two narratives operate as originally conceived.

The review in literary magazine *Gutter* alludes towards the PhD research by noting that at times “we have the strange sense of a teenager equipped with the hindsight of a well-informed researcher” in the Aoife narrative, but does temper this with the assertion that “the strength of the writing is enough to prevent the narrative stalling” (*Gutter Magazine*, 2012). However, the effectiveness of the editing process in differentiating between the critical and the creative sides of the doctoral project and producing a creative product that holds relatively few markers of the critical process is attested to by the review for *We Love This Book*, which states that “No word is wasted, no imagery subdued” (Holgate, 2012) in *So It Is*.

One of the key concerns of the PhD, discussed above, is to represent or even reimagine the role of women in the Troubles conflict and the author profile in *The Observer* allowed for presentation of this argument:

the driving force behind the book, was Cassie’s narrative, this idea of women becoming actively involved in the violence... because it’s a hugely male domain and stepping into it raises all kinds of complications, but also because it’s such a departure from the domestic sphere. (Bell quoted in Kappala-Ramsamy, 2012)

This discussion of the novel, furthered by the interviews in *The Irish Post* and on *BBC Radio Scotland*, allowed me to explicate elements of the process of writing the creative text that were supported by the research undertaken for my doctoral studies and ensured that I was able to underline and emphasise the aims and objectives of the project as a whole.

## Conclusion

Through the course of this chapter, an argument has been followed that it is possible to use the impending ‘product’ of publication as a means to develop and refine the ‘process’ of undergoing a Postgraduate degree in Creative Writing. From the title of the creative work, through editing and adherence to the NAWC benchmark statement that proposes research into both content and form, the chapter proposes a system of negotiation and compromise between the two institutions that support the writer in this context: the academy and the publisher. It is here that it is useful to add a caveat or two. Firstly, the university through which I studied for my PhD, the University of Surrey, were amenable to the idea of approaching publishers before my doctoral studies were complete and, indeed, to the production of a commercial novel before the thesis had been submitted. Not all institutions would necessarily follow this model. Secondly, the publishers I approached with *So It Is*, Myriad Editions, are an independent press with an Arts Council England grant to develop debut novels and, as such, are both enthusiastic and proactive about supporting creative work that is innovative in both content and form. Again, not all publishers would necessarily welcome attempts to include prose poetry or to employ a split narrative perspective and I owe a debt of gratitude to them for their willingness to develop those aspects of the novel which were central to the aims and objectives of the PhD.

It is useful, also, to detail the ways in which the critical inquiry required for a PhD in Creative Writing differs from the research undertaken to complete any creative project. Michele Wandor identifies an issue with the prospect of a writer engaging with their own work by discussing critical writing that “heavily features the first-person pronoun” and thus presents the exegesis as often being the writer’s “own report, or point-of-view”, before further noting that “it is more than a little ironic” to find this method in “a field where ‘show, don’t tell’ is often trotted out as golden advice” (Wandor, 2008, 146). In my discussion of how the doctoral research was altered or amended by commercial publication, I have been showing the progression from one to the other and self-reflexively examining the changes necessitated by that movement. Those changes, as

a result of the doctoral research, were not only informed by subjective opinion but also by an academic rigour that provided a context and a support for those decisions. It was of immense benefit to the commercial publication that the reasoning for choosing the title was predicated on the desire to allude to plot, setting and characterisation; that the editing process presented the opportunity to further aspects of the research both in terms of the role of women in the Troubles conflict and the wider context of historical events; and that the interest in developing the relationship between form and content in the novel was not merely an authorial tool to create suspense, but also supported the portrayal of the discourses of gender and violence within the novel.

Working with a publisher to edit *So It Is* to publication, then, involved a series of negotiations and compromises but ultimately allowed for inconsistencies and incongruities to be removed or reworked and for the narrative to be further refined creatively without relinquishing focus on the critical concerns of the exegesis. The ‘product’ of *So It Is* – the ‘object and result’ – conforms to the original ideas and aims formed during the ‘process’ of writing for the Creative Writing doctorate – the ‘perception, memory and action’ – and therefore, on the whole, the input of a commercial editorial and publishing team was a beneficial and productive addition to the critical-creative project, with both the doctoral thesis and the novel emerging stronger as a result.

### Further Reading

- A useful explication of the influence of M.M.Bakhtin on Narrative Theory and the novel as a form can be found in David Lodge’s *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (1990).
- The Troubles is examined in detail in a variety of historical texts, however Tim Pat Coogan’s *The Troubles: Ireland’s Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace* (1996) provides an authoritative summary.
- The status of women in Northern Ireland during the Troubles period is alluded to in most historical accounts, including the one above, but it is social anthropologist Begoña Artexaga’s *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivism in Northern Ireland* (1997) that provides a detailed analysis of their collective ‘role’ in the conflict.
- *So It Is* was published by Myriad Editions, Brighton, on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2012 and is available now.

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