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Relevant or Not? Literature, Literary Research and Literary Researchers in Troubled Times

Rosemary Ross Johnston

In a world post-September 11 2001, with seemingly endless escalations of war and violence in so many places, engaging one's time in literary research may appear futile and perhaps even self-indulgent. Scientific research has obvious and immediate outcomes that directly benefit the human condition (although it can of course have the reverse effect in certain fields – developments in weapon technology for example). Medical research helps to cure diseases. Social research facilitates planning for the future in all sorts of ways. Comparatively, it may certainly seem that literature and research in literature – exploring texts for what they say and how they say it, tangling with ideas of different takes or 'comprehensive grasps' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 408) on the world – have no such directly observable beneficial outcomes. On the surface at least, they indeed may appear removed from everyday needs. In reality, however, literature, literary research and literary researchers need to play an increasingly significant and creative role in a troubled world.

Last year, while in South Africa, I listened to an African colleague commenting on a conference paper about the so-called 'trauma' caused to children by some contemporary novels. This colleague quietly placed the discussion in the context of the real-life traumas – including death and disfigurement – that children in his country have to face as part of their everyday experience. The room, which was filled with international children's literature researchers, was very quiet as he told of a boy seeing his uncle's arm mutilated. There was absolute silence: we were palpably intellectually confronted with issues of triviality and irrelevance. However, our colleague went on to say that because of this, *because* of this horror, and because of the violence that generates it, children's books were not just of life-enhancing significance but of *life* significance. For there to be any hope in his troubled country, children, he said, have to be shown that there are other ways of being and other ways of thinking. Books, through the magic of story, not only motivate children to want to read, and

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help them to learn how to read, but also, again through the magic of story, present them with images of other options and versions of life and living. These images shift conceptions of others and otherness and problematize unthinking cultural and social reproduction.

One of the most significant aspects of literature is that it not only represents but also imaginatively legitimates difference. Others have written of the need for children to be educated into understandings of ambiguity (Seelinger Trites, 2002); referring to the larger community, John Ralston Saul discusses 'the need for conscious uncertainty' (2002: 82). Children have to be educated, and become literate, but most of all they need to develop what I have earlier referred to as 'the literacy of the imagination' (Johnston, 2000, 2001). It is imaginative literacy which is at the core of understanding the coherence and integrity of otherness.

This demonstrates the significance of books (and the creative work of writers and illustrators) but not necessarily the significance of what we as researchers do. I want to argue that research is transformative, and that researchers are 'transformers': educators and teacher-scholars who sometimes shape new awareness of *what is*, by describing it, and sometimes 'draw out' and 'raise up' (*educo*) awareness of *what is not* but *could be*, perhaps suggesting reasons and resources for change. As I have written elsewhere (Johnston, 2002), research is a creative act:

> Researchers-as-artists choose words carefully and aesthetically not only to describe but to inspire, and to construct new stages for debate and discussion.

As literary researchers we have a serious contribution to make, not only in intellectual and educational fields but also in the arena of policy and politics. The 'Stars of Africa' series of books for young children is badged with the logo *Building a Nation of Readers*. Such a logo, and the ethos out of which it emerges, is an outcome of researchers and teachers working together to demonstrate the importance of reading, arguing that importance to private and public organizations (publishers and governments), and promoting a receptive climate in which writers and illustrators are encouraged and inspired to deliver quality products.

One book in this wonderful little series tells the story of Mama Nozincwadi who could not read but who loved and collected books. One day she hears of a village boy, Muzi, who has been sent home from school because his parents cannot afford to buy him a book that he needs. She takes Muzi to town and buys the book for him. Later, to thank her, he reads her the story.

> Mama Nozincwadi sat still. Her eyes were wide open as she listened to every word that Muzi read from his book. When he looked up, he saw her face and he was very pleased with himself.
>
> 'Child, do you want to tell me that these books are like wise old people who can take you by the hand and teach you many things about life?', she asked him.
>
> 'Yes, Mama, I like books for that. Also it feels like I am talking to the person who wrote that book. Sometimes it makes me feel as if I can go with the eyes of my mind to the places in the book, and I thank you for your help.'
>
> Mama Nozincwadi wanted to know more. 'What else do you read about in school?'
>
> 'At school we learn about how electricity is made. We read about bird life and animals,

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> the rolling hills and mountains of KwaZulu-Natal and the trees and sugar cane that grow there. We learn about the big world we live in and the many things we see around us every day.' (Mhlophe, 2001)

There is a clear political implication in the logo of this series, not just that everyone needs to read, but that making readers is part of the act of building a nation – of building a national story. In the West, where books are generally plentiful, we may feel that the importance of story is obvious, but perhaps this idea needs to be reinvigorated. Story – verbal and visual – helps to develop a sense of relational and generational equity, and serves a moral purpose by opening up 'the eyes of the mind' to perceiving *others-as-equal-I's* in seams of presence and responsibility within the deepest layers of one's own life. African countries have much to teach about the significance of story and about the importance of telling stories – of past and present – to the young. At the same conference (the International Research Society for Children's Literature Congress), a fellow researcher described the way in which, in some African cultures, young girls at puberty are deliberately educated into tribal story. The girl is taken to a special place and surrounded by women elders who one after another and for several days, tell her about her ancestors, repeating over and over again the stories that are part of their common past. The researcher described this practice as a 'waterfall of stories' being poured over the head of the girl (de Sterck, 2001). The purpose of this intensive storytelling is overtly focused, first, to regenerate the past, and second, to enlarge conceptions of the present; the stories 'bring the ancestors up' to meet one of their progeny, and demonstrate to the young girl entering adulthood that she is connected and belongs to a time that is beyond herself and her own moment.

The image of the waterfall of stories has stayed with me, an example of the language art of the researcher. Her description of this cultural practice and its purposes reminded me of the words of another researcher, Mikhail Bakhtin, who coined the term 'Great Time' to describe a 'fullness of time' that is the 'perspectives of centuries' (1986: 4), and that transcends any individual lifetime, of either a person or a literary text. Human lives, like literary texts, are made denser and deeper when we 'break through the boundaries' of our own time into a sense of time that is populated with others, that is characterized by, in Bakhtin's words again, '*not-I* in me, that is, existence in me; something larger than me in me' (1986: 146). This conception of Great Time does not in any way detract from individual significance, rather, it inherently adds to it by connecting the individual to a time that exceeds personal experience. Considering this, it is legitimate to wonder if some of the stories that are published for American and English and Australian teenagers are more focused on the contemporary moment and the individual's pivotal importance in it, than on nurturing the perspectives of centuries or such a sense of great time (Gleeson's *Eleanor Elizabeth*, 1984, Park's *Playing Beatie Bow*, 1980, Hartnett's *Wilful Blue*, 1994 and the works of Nadia Wheatley are among notable Australian exceptions). However, while some books for older readers may not do this so well, many picture books do it very well indeed – they morally challenge the solipsism of childhood by confronting children with the reality of the subjectivities of other 'I's who are both past and present. Cassirer, discussing the 19th-century aesthetician Konrad Fiedler,

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talks about a notion of 'seeability' as part of the activity of artistic production; language and art raise consciousness as the discursive thinking of language and 'the 'intuitive' activity of artistic seeing and creating interact so as together to weave the cloak of 'reality'' (Cassirer, 1996: 83–4). Picture books, because of the combined and interactive efforts of writers, illustrators, teachers and researchers, have become a sophisticated art form that gives child-accessible seeability to the deepest mysteries and complexities of life and living: birth (*Hello Baby*, by Overend and Vivas, 1999); death, loss and grief (*Grandpa* by Lilith Norman, 1998, *Resan till Ugri-La-Brek* by the Tidholms, 1995); jealousy, possessiveness and fear of the other (*John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* by Wagner and Brooks, 1977); aging (*Jag såg, jag ser* by Jaensson and Grähs, 1997, *Mrs Millie's Painting* by Ottley, 1998); and family, community and love (*Peepo*, by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, 1981).

Our role as literary researchers is to push intellectual boundaries, challenge established ideas and practices, and stimulate and give seeability to creative ideas (including those that are our own). It is to be daring. It is to provoke – artistically, educationally and morally. In Australia it is a strange inconsistency that even as we learn more and more about 'the indivisibility of art and culture in Indigenous societies', and the arts as the 'maintenance and affirmation of Aboriginality' (Kleinert and Neale, 2000: vi–vii), and the Aboriginal concept of the land as 'a vibrant spiritual landscape' (Anderson, 1987), we seem to be less and less sure about talking about arts and culture and spirituality as part of the deep structure of our lives. Perhaps this is a necessary stage along the way of progressing forward; Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991) is a moving and powerful metaphor of such a process. However, in a land criss-crossed by songline and traced with rock art stories that are arguably 40,000 years old (Kleinert and Neale, 2000: 105), it seems a strange deficiency.

We need to reaffirm, as David Parker (another researcher) does, that literature and the arts are 'sites of the culture's deepest moral questionings' (1998: 15). We need to be more comfortable about the links between the arts and philosophy and between the arts and 'ethical reflection' (Haines, 1998: 34). Martha Nussbaum writes, in terms of the novel, that 'respect for a soul' is 'built into the genre itself' (1990: 242); Lisabeth During notes that 'moral education, far from being irrelevant to art, is precisely what the artist, and particularly the novelist, can perform, none better' (1998: 66). This concept of moral education does not relate to a list of dos and don'ts, but rather to the notion of a spirited response to life, of a conception of the living moment shared, and to the idea that life and moral obligation are more than conduct. It also acknowledges what Cora Diamond calls the 'mystery in human lives'; this mystery is tied to the idea that:

> [T]here is far more to things, to life, than we know or understand. Such a feeling is tied to a rejection of the spirit of knowingness often found in abstract moral and social theorizing. (Diamond, 1998: 51)

Here is another expression of the significance of understanding the integrity of ambiguity. Literature helps to formulate a moral vision and provide a forum for the discussion of moral understanding, and researchers have an important role to play in bringing that discussion into the public gaze. Because of our postmodern[1] hesi-

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tancy in these areas, we have suffered what Iris Murdoch calls a 'loss of concepts' and thus 'a dilution of experience' (Haines, 1998: 23).

> What we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being . . . It is here that literature is so important . . . Through literature we can rediscover a sense of the density of our lives. (Murdoch, 1983: 43–9)

Those who are prepared to engage with this difficulty and complexity enlarge and creatively attend to concepts of moral apprehension and well-beingness. Consider these words of the researcher and analyst, Julie Kristeva, on forgiveness, and note the premise of timelessness (another way of conceiving of Great Time):

> Forgiveness is ahistorical. It breaks the concatenation of causes and effects, crimes and punishments, it stays the time of actions. A strange space opens up in a timelessness that is not one of the primitive unconscious, desiring and murderous, but its counterpart – its sublimation with full knowledge of the facts, a loving harmony that is aware of its violences but accommodates them, elsewhere . . .
>
> Let me emphasise the timelessness of forgiving . . .
>
> Forgiveness does not cleanse actions. It raises the unconscious from beneath the actions and has it meet a loving other – an other who does not judge but hears my truth in the availability of love, and for that very reason allows me to be reborn. Forgiveness is the luminous stage of dark, unconscious timelessness – the stage at which the latter changes laws and adopts the bond with love as a principle of renewal of both self and other. (1989: 173–205)

Thoughts, T. S. Eliot wrote in *Selected Essays* (1921), 'impact and subtly change the self who thinks them'. Kristeva's words represent one thinker's version of a moral response to life, one who is not afraid to call the shots, and say that living life to the full means to love, and that love is a principle of renewal. (This is a very different type of love to the fanatical 'love' that Saul cautions us against.) Here also is a sense of time –'timelessness' – and a sense of space (spatialism) beyond oneself.

Once again I am bound to draw attention to children's picture books – an increasingly sophisticated genre and an adaptation of the novel form (see Johnston, 2001) – and the contribution they make to children's growing knowledge of concepts, intuitive sense of 'mystery', moral awareness, and time and space other than that which they are living out and in at present. *Fox*, by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks (2000), *Rain Dance*, by Cathy Applegate and Dee Huxley (2000), *The Wolf*, by Margaret Barbalet and Jane Tanner (1994), are just three of countless examples.

Foucault talks somewhere about 'layers of an ever-accumulating past'. Another way of conceptualizing time is as layers of an ever-accumulating present. The top layer (the present) is not smooth and neat and tidy and opaque, but messy and irregular, and transparent in parts, with random images from various previous layers showing through here and there like a pentimento. In other places, like a palimpsest, and 'like shining from shook foil',[2] it is shot through with fragments of words and language that are old but still clearly visible – used, but not used up. Literature, drama, visual arts, music, enhance both our presentness and what

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McCooey calls the 'past which is beyond [our] own memories (1996: 107); they encourage us into a 'being-in-relation' that:

> . . . entails risk-taking, and a capability to be in mystery, without defensively reconstructing the world to fit one's desired shape and pattern. It involves imaginative excursiveness, a going-out of oneself and also a letting-into oneself of things that may delight, surprise, shock, challenge, intensely disturb. (Adamson, 1998: 107)

The process of coming into this being-in-relation is a type of learning that is transformative. A recent performance of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* at the Sydney Opera House was not only a brilliant examination of 'the evil that men do'; it unequivocally located that evil in the self-centredness and complacency of individual desire when it is separated from any form of ethical concern for the other. This individual desire sometimes appears cosy and comfortable, as we can make our own desires seem cosy and comfortable. The opera is an exegesis of amorality, full of folkloric and fairytale motifs (witches in ovens, the lone girl-object of *Red Riding Hood* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the wicked stepmother/father figure of *Snow White* and *Hansel and Gretel).* It is an art form that prods individual consciousness into acute moral awareness of its own potential for weakness. This examination of one type of living practice (that is, a practice of living) throws into relief a sort of 'creative attending to' our own practices. *Sweeney Todd*, like *Lear* and *Macbeth*, drags us albeit unwillingly into learning more about ourselves.

Literature is an art and research is an art. The art of the researcher conspires with the artistry of writers and poets and painters and musicians (themselves researchers) and proposes connections – to other similar texts, to other different texts, to other texts by the same artist, to related texts by different artists, to related texts of different periods, to the artist's life, away from the artist's life, and so on. It is engaged in the production of multiple ways of seeing, optional entry points, and articulations within diverse hermeneutic paradigms. Even more important, however, is the capacity of researchers to entice further imaginative considerations of the moral and philosophical concerns of texts, and what they may or may not express about what life is and how it can be lived. This is itself an art that is generative and that encourages subjunctive modes of thinking – were this me, were this you, were this the situation – what if?

One final point. One of the arts of research is to push across disciplines – to encourage different ways of looking, as well as different ways of seeing. Thus, for example, as literary researchers in an increasingly televisual world, rather than spending time lamenting the popularity of, say, soap operas among young viewers (the Australian 'soap' *Neighbours* has been running for 17 years), we can choose to look at these stories in a literary way, and perhaps come to theoretical understandings of their appeal. I would claim that soapies are modern versions of folktales – tales *of the folk*, oral stories told and retold by many tellers, endlessly repeated variations on common themes. After viewing, their stories are subsequently recalled and retold by multiple tellers in coffee shops and school playgrounds. Archetypal characters, including the trickster figure who features in folktales across almost every western and eastern culture, engage in archetypal adventures – journeys from

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home to away (*Home and Away* is another well-known Australian soap that has been running for 14 years) and back again, with enlarged understandings of life (as in the *bildung*). Like folktales, soapies encourage a sense of community, promulgate a shared value system among their viewers, and develop their own sense of heritage and symbolic capital. Soaps do not follow the adventures of one hero but of many heroes; they represent a postmodern shift to multiple subjectivities: in the everyday worlds of soap opera, everyone can be – and is – a hero.

Why mention this in a discussion of the significance of literature? First, because it serves to show how literary knowledge of an ancient storytelling form can help understanding of a cultural reality. Second, because it demonstrates the art of researchers, and shows how it is through their discussions and development of theories of postmodernism that we understand and can make sense of the shift from a single hero to multiple heroes, from the celebration of the grand and 'heroic' to the celebration of the ordinary and the everyday. Third, because it is this shift that has instigated and welcomed difference, heterogeneity and the inclusion – with intrinsic and extrinsic integrity – of the formerly marginalized other:

> Postmodernism has . . . been associated with the positive evaluation of local and popular cultures, the minor traditions and the 'otherness' excluded by the universalistic pretension of the modern. This suggests an increasing sensitivity to the more complex levels of unity, to the syncretism, heterogeneity, and the common taken-for-granted 'seen but unnoticed' aspects of everyday life. (Featherstone, 1992: 159)

So, literary research not only celebrates literature, but uses a literary optic to offer positive perspectives on other aspects of an increasingly globalized culture. In my opinion this does not demean literature; rather, it shows its pervasiveness, its evolutionary powers, its survivability. Soapies are not literature, but they emerge from the same artistic impulse, the power of the will to story. Researchers, too, are storytellers. The stories that we tell and the connections that we make will help to play a vital role in stimulating the sorts of stories – inclusive not exclusive, tolerant not intolerant, heterogeneous not homogeneous – that are needed if we are, as a global community, to survive.

Rosemary Ross Johnston
University of Technology Sydney

Notes

1. Note that the concept of postmodernism itself was introduced by researchers. Easthope reports that the word was used in the 1960s to describe the novels of John Barth and the dance of Merce Cunningham. Charles Jencks wrote *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* in 1975. Jean-François Lyotard was the 'first important advocate of postmodernism in philosophy and culture', publishing *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979 (Easthope, in Sim, 1998: 18). Also note that some believe that the age of postmodernism has now given way to a new age of 'spatialism' and 'critical realism.'
2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', *Poems 1876–1889.*

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