CHAPTER 5 – HISTORY AND METHOD: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

I would like to write the history of this… Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing a history of the present.

– Michel Foucault[1]

History as fiction

Writing history – as for any form of writing, any act of story-telling – involves making selections, setting limits, and choosing a perspective, even if the chosen perspective is a supposedly neutral or ‘god’s eye’ one. As Hayden White and others have argued, there are no inherent story-lines or plots within the details of the past, or any intrinsic greater significance or value of some events or people over others. All these things are interpreted, evaluated, ordered and added by the writer/observer, using a language that is already full of metaphoricity (already full of stories and perspectives).[2]

'History' as a mass of past events is only an abstract; it doesn’t exist for us outside the realm of discourse. Even archeological remains only acquire their meaning as historical facts once they have been described and classified. And even when certain things about the past may be agreed upon by cultural consensus, the significance or interpretation of those ‘accepted facts’ – the relationship of these to other events or facts – is constantly debated.

Like the ‘nature’ of the body, the ‘nature’ of history (and the body in history) is a culturally inflected matter.

Empiricist views often see the writing of history as a collective accumulative project in which we are gradually moving towards the ‘real truth’ of what happened or what it was like, as more ‘pieces of the jigsaw puzzle’ are discovered – as if the past was a tangible and static object; and as ‘more accurate interpretations’ are made – as if we had any objective means to judge the ‘accuracy’ of interpretations, rather than simply their resonance for us.

Instead, as Ankersmith has suggested, histories might best be regarded not as *representations* of past events, but as *presentations* or proposals[3]; not as something which aims to *correspond* with a past reality ('this actually happened') but as something which aims merely to be *coherent* with the traces of the past that are available to us ('this is consistent with or correlates with what we can and have observed').[4]

In this view, the historian still has to pay attention to the available traces. These cannot be simply ignored to fit with a preferred theory or story. They still need to be sifted and weighed, checked and compared to other sources and interpretations, and the historian still has to engage in hypothesis-testing by searching for and gathering more evidence. But no amount of this can make a history 'accurate' or 'definitive' in any ultimate sense. It is always a theory of what happened: a story. And while it may be coherent with the available traces (a valid or plausible – even elegant – history), there may be other equally coherent and meaningful versions possible.[5]

In this way, one could also be said to be doing a *reading* of the traces. Like any text, the traces of the past can be read creatively and imaginatively, and as Keith Jenkins suggests, disobediently (25). Whatever the original intention of a particular set of traces, we have a certain amount of choice in how we interpret, arrange and link them, and it is in this sense that history is something created (a fabrication) rather than something discovered or uncovered.

History writing is a continuing cultural conversation, and a process – like the constant remembering and forgetting and re-membering (each time slightly differently), shuffling and sifting and ordering of our personal memories. It is a process that is undertaken not once, but over and over again. New information can always act back onto the past information to alter and transform it for us, and it is in this sense that Jenkins writes that 'the past as history lies before us':

> The sifting out of that which is historically significant depends on us, so that what 'the past' means to us is always our task to 'figure out'; what we want our inheritance/history 'to be' is always waiting to be 'read' and written in the future like any other text: the past as history lies before us, not behind us. (30)

Furthermore, history writing, as with all forms of story-telling, is an affective discourse. It involves aesthetic decisions, and value decisions, and these involve our experiences and personal histories as embodied subjects. The narrative style used will impact on the effect of the story on readers (and writers), as well as on the kinds of stories that are able to be told.

Both the title – *A Short (Personal) History* – and the montage style of my novel signal the selectiveness of the processes of history-telling. While there are valid and considered reasons for my selection and arrangement, a different person would inevitably make a different selection, and factors such as gender, sexuality, age, cultural background, and whether or not one has had children (and breast-fed) would colour one's choices in myriad ways, as it does with all history-making.

By mixing up things that are personally and emotionally significant to the narrator, Angela, with things that are considered publicly significant; mixing trivia with events of great social impact – and involving readers in these in similar ways – the givenness of the historical story is destabilised. While the public traces it makes use of, draws on and interprets can be checked for fidelity, with montage of this kind, there is always the implicit ability or invitation to reshuffle the story, to add in the reader's own memories or knowledge, to edit the connections and, through a different juxtaposition of elements, to create a different meaning.

This kind of history demands that it be judged according to whether it is 'true' only in the sense of whether it is pleasurable, useful, interesting, provocative, relevant, and honest, and whether it corresponds in certain ways with the reader's own experiences and knowledge, rather than on whether it corresponds with any objective reality, past or present. For while a seamless realist narrative is beautiful and entrancing precisely because it is hard to argue with (and thus is usually only beautiful if we don't find ourselves actively disagreeing with its values or 'moral'), what I have tried to create is a narrative that plays transparently with the malleability of 'reality' and (literally) keeps giving space for disagreement.

The way conventional history becomes a history of the winners is in writing it from the winner's point of view as if this were the only point of view possible. And for this reason it is important to keep writing lots of histories, a proliferation of points of view, a plethora of maps, and to keep exploring new ways of doing this. As Paul Carter put it: the political realm is an aesthetic realm, and the way we counter a myth is with better myths.[6]

'A myth,' Deepak Chopra writes, 'has the power to take choice and make it seem like destiny.'[7] What I wanted to do was to take choice and emphasise that it is choice – not one big (wide, free) choice, but an infinite number of small choices, responses, reactions and habits that collectively make up our realities. And that within this there is always the possibility of change.

The uses of montage

In the novel samples which are the second part of this thesis, I have tried to create a text that doesn't always speak from one single stable place, but which more closely matches the way we are constantly forming a whole range of links with ourselves, our histories, with each other and the culture.

We live in a culture made up so much of bits and borrowings and reworkings of other images, concepts and voices that come from a whole range of places at once. A culture in which power is diffuse, everywhere; where subjectivity or identity is something constantly in production; and in which meanings are perpetually made and unmade, remembered and forgotten.

So the novel is constructed via myriad interlinking, cross-referencing moments within an outer chronological frame of Angela's present-time narrative that takes place in 1999. Blended with the story-lines that proliferate within this are fragments of memories, myth and anecdotes, jokes, advertisements, encyclopedia entries, dream images, newspaper or magazine clippings and gossip, scenes from television programs, as well as mini-essays on various topics that have arisen in the course of the narrative.

Spliced in between the narrative chapters are other 'voices' or testimonies (for instance from women who have had silicone implants), as well as history 'great moments' cards (such as the many versions of who first invented the bra).

In this 'history as bits', I'm interested in the bits not as something that you could ever put together to (re)create an original whole, but as fragments used to create daily meaning and truths, and which each person might use in a different way and different combination. This is history modelled more on the metaphor of the database – or the library where Angela works (with the threat of the Y2K bug ever-present in the background and the fear that we might end up endlessly repeating the century).

While history is still largely represented on the page as chronological, memories and dreams (both public and private) more often move and are organised by less logical means. For instance via metaphor and metonymy, and a whole range of other side-ways, rhizomatic and recurrent links. As filmmaker Alexander Kluge has said about his experimental montage style:

> These images correspond precisely to the brain's way of functioning. A brain never only perceives something in the present. When I see something in the

> present, it reminds me… of something in the past, something earlier... and thus I perceive that and make a connection with the future.[8]

One of the roles of my novel text is to explore these patterns, as well as the gaps, slippages and contradictions – the texture or fabric, and the 'humour' of the culture within which we live and work, out of which we make meanings, and which through our actions and choices we help to produce. Within this montage of images and story lines, juxtaposition and imagery can operate as a powerful form of argument or statement, via a process in which the reader is heavily involved, and which doesn't stop when the text ends.

For instance by using the arrival of a postcard, a visual stage prop of a picture on a corkboard, a plot that involves researching in 1960s newspapers and a backstory of family telephone calls, I can talk about Nick Ut's famous photograph of the little girl running down the road in Vietnam with her clothes burnt off from napalm; memories of my own pre-pubescence; the past 30 years' multi-billion dollar 'war' on cancer and its privileged chemical weapons; Dow Chemicals history of producing both napalm and silicone for breast implants; the history of conscientious objectors and protest; and Maddie's determination to seek alternatives to waging war on her body, all within a few pages. And with a good image, within the same breath.

In this I am taking a step further a style that I developed in writing my first book of fiction, *How to Conceive of a Girl.*[9] This is a style that has grown out of working with essays and with fiction, with a gradual merging together of the two forms, so that my essays have increasingly used techniques usually associated with fiction (a personal voice, images, dialogue, metaphor, anecdote) and my stories have been increasingly addressing issues and exploring ideas in ways that I previously felt was only possible in essays.

In developing this way of working I have been influenced by film (especially the work of the New German Cinema, such as that of Alexander Kluge and Rainer Werner Fassbinder), documentary and docu-drama, by my experience scripting and producing radio features, and my practice with poetry[10]. These are all forms that use various techniques to create a style that is dense, compacted, elliptical and evocative. As with sound and poetry, in my fiction the positioning and choice of words, and the positioning and choice of paragraphs and sections is a meticulous process that involves every faculty – head and heart, intellect and instinct – working over and over the sentences and juxtapositions, refining and expanding the ideas, moving things around and playing with the language until something clicks.

I have also been influenced by montage forms that are part of mainstream culture. As a child of the late 1950s, television was my first narrative language: like most of the post-Boomer generation, I learnt to read the screen before I learnt to read books. Indeed, rather than seeing montage as an 'experimental' or fringe form of narrative, what might seem to be aberrant in contemporary culture is to have long uninterrupted (or un-disrupted) book-length works of a single texture and with a single speaking subject and place of enunciation. Montage and a mix of styles is, I would argue, a mainstream practice, integral not just to television and film but also to radio, video clips, contemporary music such as hip hop, magazines, newspapers, the internet, fashion, parades, even shopping malls (and shopping itself).

One of the advantages of this style is that it allows a very reflective kind of discourse, as I'm able to jump forward and back in time, and can use a multiplicity of language styles and narrative techniques to include a wide range of ideas and types of information.

For instance, being able to move about in time I don't always have to report conversations in narrative present-time or even in any specifically located flashback. Thus, when setting up associations, images and ideas around a particular issue, I can include a passage that begins 'Maddie says…' (or 'Bob says…' etcetera). She may have said it six months ago, or it may be something she says regularly, or she may have said it yesterday, or today, but not necessarily.

I also found that sometimes the best way to convey a large lump of information is to just to splice it in, without any introduction, as a mini-essay (for instance, regarding the chemical legacy of the Vietnam War, or the history of baby bottle milk). Sometimes, if it is carefully written with attention to rhythm and nuances, this can be more interesting and pleasurable than if it is forced into the narrative (for instance, by being given as dialogue to one or more characters).

Angela (the narrator) is the pivot for the kaleidoscope of ideas, stories and images that interlace her narrative and crop up in between the chapters. My guess is that readers raised on montage are sophisticated enough to be able to handle these elliptical jumps and switches in voice, and that forging the links can become a part of the reading pleasure. The implication is that this is Angela's collection of thoughts or things that come to her attention, but it's not necessary to believe that she is the originator of them all. These could be things she reads or hears, or things she has read at some time, or perhaps even things sitting unread on her computer or on the shelves of the library where she works. Or these could be originating from one of the other characters – Wanda, for instance; although Wanda herself could be a part of Angela's dreaming, seeing as we don't actually meet her in person, but only glimpse traces of

her activities when we accompany Angela on her occasional forays down into the tunnels under the library.

In this way the place of enunciation is often effaced (as with much of our cultural input, it could be spoken from ‘anywhere’ or ‘nowhere’), and at all times it is constantly shifting and multiple, so that the implied discursive relationship is unstable. While this in some ways allows readers more opportunity to position themselves where they like – to not feel the need to identify with (sympathise or agree with) a single authorial voice – it also challenges them to remain flexible.

As the nexus for this, Angela is not designed to be a heroine with whom readers necessarily identify or sympathise; what I have aimed for instead is to create characters that are engaging – that draw you to them, and who are enjoyable to watch, whether or not you would like them in real life. Sympathy is an emotional response to having things in common – tastes, opinions, dispositions, experiences – a feeling of commiseration or agreement (in sympathy: 'with' or ‘like’, as in ‘symphony’, and ‘symmetry’), and involves little intellectual engagement. Empathy, however, involves work. You sympathise *insofar* as the other is the same; you empathise *even though* the other is different. Empathy requires the subject to enter into and experience the other's point of view, even if it isn't their own; to actively accept difference, rather than reducing it to a self/other, same/opposite framework. Indeed to empathise successfully, one often needs to question one's own position, and to overcome personal or cultural taboos, prejudices and assumptions.

If, as I have suggested in earlier chapters, our ‘truths’ are derived not from being able to tap into an objective reality, but from how well something corresponds with our experiences, then by changing our experiences (and changing our relationships) we can change our truths. My aim with this fiction is to create a kind of laboratory for exploring and experimenting with different positions and ideas – a meditative space for observing moments of the culture at work, the connections, disconnections, the performance of images and concepts. A place where one can be detached – a witness – while also remaining physically present and attentive. Thus fiction can be a way of organising and playing with our subjective experiences, and in doing so, a way of changing them. A way not just to document social and cultural relationships or ‘represent’ history, but a way of actively intervening in the process of cultural and subject formation, a way of shifting – even if only slightly – who we are, what we feel, and what we think.

Structure, characters, devices and themes

The architecture of the novel is an outer frame that begins early in the year 1999, and ends at the Party at the end of the Millennium. Within this is a series of linguistic or thematic 'plots', told through a variety of characters and devices. There is also a loose decade trajectory that maps across these chapters, tracing Angela's personal history, from her childhood in the 1960s through adolescence in the 70s, her early adult years in the 80s, then the final *fin de siecle* years until the novel's present.

The following cast of characters, voices and devices have been gradually built up to provide a mass of possibilities for exploring the range of issues prompted by the novel's title.

Angela, the narrator, works part-time at the Victorian State Library and moonlights doing research for a Dr B. The novel is set in 1999, and she has just turned forty. She is a collage artist who has recently had another not terribly successful exhibition, and realises she'll never be great. She has no children. She tends to have relationships that are interesting rather than sensible (her substitute, she says, for foreign travel), like her current relationship with a younger man named Leo. Angela is the centre of the novel, with the other characters all related to her in some way. Like most of the characters, she is trying to find the right fit (rather than the perfect fit), perhaps a punk do-it-yourself kind of life rather than couture, but definitely not off-the-rack.

Naturally, in a book about breasts, she grew up on a dairy farm. She was born in late 1958, two years after television first came to Australia, and is thus part of that first experimental generation of girls who entered adolescence after the publication of *The Female Eunuch* and the introduction in Australia of no-fault divorce: the generation that inhabited that brief historical moment in between girdles and anorexia and were led to believe they could have it all.[11]

As a collage artist she spends a lot of time cutting up magazines, so it is not so surprising that snippets of magazine gossip and tips are sprinkled throughout the book. Working at the library, a lot of different books pass through her hands, and she has all sorts of strange requests from the public when she is rostered on the information help line. At her work, the television is always on in the lunch room, often tuned to something like *Oprah*. And of course she has her research for Dr B, via her friend Natalie.

Natalie is Angela's bosom buddy since primary school; an art curator, also working for Dr B. Has a cat called Terence.

Dr B is a retiree fulfilling his life-long dream of creating a world-class underwear museum in a small town in Central Victoria. He employs Natalie to do research, and she in turn employs Angela as her ghost-researcher. Dr B has possibly been a clothes designer in the past, or a milliner, or maybe worked for Berlei.

Dr B's project enables the novel to be scattered with a collection of 'history spots' – *Great Moments in Underwear* and *Invention of the Bra* versions (all the many and conflicting versions of who was first, who claimed credit, who is and isn't remembered). The implication is that these are written by Angela or Natalie for Dr B, as information-placards for his museum.

James/ Christine – Natalie's nephew, who likes to cross-dress. James is in his early twenties, the type of person who might be doing a course in Gender Studies at University. James' sexuality is never actually discussed, but is probably undecided: a 'narrative constantly under revision', as Vera Whisman has described it: part of the late twentieth century 'proliferation of identities'.[12] When asked why he likes to cross-dress he tends to reply 'Because I can.' For James, cross-dressing is probably more than anything about being *not-male* for a while, something he finds incredibly relaxing. Also he loves clothes, especially 1970s fashions. James exists in the novel as a disruptive energy, rather than as an attempt to represent even one of the many complex manifestations of transgender in a fully rounded character. There are so many problems associated with representation and speaking-for others, that it was a relief when I realised I didn't have to try to nail down exactly what James's 'story' was, but could let him be there simply as a boundary crosser, a catalyst. [13]

Leo – Angela's lover for part of the book, aged about 30. He surfs and works as a labourer, but wants to do a course to become a masseur. Leo would be happy to be Angela's house-husband if she let him. He's less concerned about the age difference than she is (or the many other differences). However, at forty, Angela is starting to be confronted by the most serious changes to her body since adolescence so she can definitely hear the clock ticking on this relationship, despite it being extremely pleasurable and Leo being wonderfully endearing. Leo also stretches Angela emotionally because she has never really experienced much nurture from her boyfriends, even (or especially) the soft-breasted older ones; and it's surprising for her that this hard-chested young man is the closest she's come to getting this.

Gail – downstairs neighbour, mother of three children with a new baby in the womb (Xanthe) at the start of the book.

Ruby, Rachel and Victor (4, 7, 10) – Gail's children. Ruby, in particular, is very preoccupied with gender distinctions, the rules of gender, and 'borderwork'.[14]

One of the themes of the novel is the way we construct knowledge of ourselves and the 'truth' of ourselves, and gender is fascinating in this respect. How do you 'know' that you are a woman or a man? How does this knowledge – or lack of it – come about? (And how is it that some children as young as two feel convinced they are not the gender assigned to them by their body type?[15])

In *Gender Outlaw*, Kate Bornstein says:

> I am so intensely curious about what it must feel like to be convinced you're a man... I'm thinking about who might be reading this; and I know that some of you really believe you are women. I want to get down on my knees in front of you, I want to get down on my knees, I want to look up into your eyes and I want to say tell me! Tell me what it's like!
> ... I never went to bed one night of my life knowing I was a man. I never went to bed one night of my life knowing I was a woman.[16]

Ruby doesn't have any major problems with seeing herself as a girl – and thus has a secure 'identity' (that is, how she sees herself is in this sense identical with how others see her) – but she is still extremely concerned with learning the details and getting them right. Of all the emotional scripts we learn in our culture, gender distinction (being clearly one or the other of a defined set of two genders) is perhaps the most imperative. It is fused so much into language, subjectivity and relationships, that to get this wrong in some way (or to 'be' wrong in some way) has huge consequences.[17]

Baby Xanthe – Gail's new baby, still in the womb at the start of the book, but born soon afterwards. Xanthe is unable to perform gender because she has no language, but she has gender performed onto her as soon as the ultrasound reveals what kind of genitals she has. Xanthe 'speaks' at various points in the book (a fantasy form of 'baby talk'), especially about her relationship to her [mother's] breasts (her breasts, as far as she is concerned) and her breast milk (but then, everything in the whole world is still hers, and her, at this stage).

Xanthe and Gail exist at the start of the book as a complex dyad. And even after they are separated by Xanthe's birth, together they continue to confound the neat self/other dichotomy that constitutes the (masculine) notion of citizenship and subjectivity, based as this is on the

concept of the body-self as having complete self-integrity and clear boundaries with others. For who has the 'rights' over the breast-milk Gail produces, or to whom does it really 'belong'? Is it Gail's because it is produced within the skin of her body, or Xanthe's as the one triggering its production and ensuring, by continuing to suckle, that it keeps being produced?

Norman – Gail's husband, who has erotic dreams about newsreader Sandra Scully.

Maddie – Angela's favourite aunt who at the start of the book has just been diagnosed with breast cancer. Maddie is about 14 years older than Angela. They are very close because in Angela's early childhood she and Bruce (the two youngest) were often sent to stay with Maddie and her mother Denise, especially during the holidays to give Angela's mother a break.

Maddie is choosing to use alternative therapies and this causes disagreement with some of her relatives such as Bruce. She is also a member of a (fictional) guerilla action group called Bust Up, modelled in some ways on ACT UP but more directly concerned with raising issues regarding environmental contaminants and rising cancer rates and the role of chemical corporations in influencing health and research policy. Maddie is a practitioner of Aikido, a defensive martial art known as 'The Art of Peace', and is the most spiritually-inclined character in the book.

Over the years of developing Maddie's character and part in the novel, I have at times been concerned that she was unrealistic (even for a novel that isn't aiming for strict realism). But then I realised that she doesn't have to be representative, or typical. If there is one person in the world who has responded like this to cancer, then she is realistic.

Maddie is also a model for me, not of how I think I would respond if I had a life-threatening illness (which is something I don't think you can know until it happens), but of how I would wish to respond: an ideal. As such she has become a character that I continually learn from and am challenged by, a vehicle for extending the way I think, and what seems permissible as I gradually come to understand – often through further research prompted by something in the novel – the logic of her way of thinking.

As a character Maddie is rarely present in a scene, but is usually talked about, referred to and paraphrased. While I have been able to draw on my own experience of having a chronic illness for many years, this is very different from having a life-threatening one. So I wanted to

signal that Maddie's experience is coming to the reader second-hand – a result of research, observation, empathy and imagination. As such her words are almost always (as much as possible) filtered and mediated through Angela. Thus I have repeatedly used the form 'Maddie says,…' rather than having her opinions or feelings in direct quotes.

Jude – Maddie's partner of many years. They live in a country town west of Melbourne, probably something like Daylesford where there is a strong alternative community (artists, Greens, old hippies, etcetera) but which is still close enough to Melbourne for many people to commute or at least go back and forth.

Bruce – Angela's brother, a couple of years older, who is deeply concerned that Maddie is not using conventional cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation, and not rushing to have surgery.

Bruce was very difficult for me to write. He began simply from the need to have a character expressing the conventional views, and it took a long time to make him a character that I liked and respected. I think at first I was basing him on the most aggressive or worst aspects of people I knew (and with whom I'd had similar confrontations), without realising that I could not only bring in the best aspects as well – such as their love and compassion – but that this was essential. Indeed, to show Maddie's courage I had to make Bruce much more than a straw man; which meant that I had to learn to have respect for his perspective.

In a piece of non-fiction I may have been tempted to simply find ways to counter these kinds of arguments, but in a work of fiction it became necessary to try to understand them, to track them to their source and context, to appreciate them as much as possible.

Nevertheless, the overall aim of the chapters that feature Bruce and Maddie (with Angela in the middle) is a polemical one, and I can't pretend to have more than some empathy for Bruce's views. Thus, as with Maddie, I have tried to avoid setting up scenes in which Bruce speaks his opinions directly. Bruce's words are always interpreted, filtered through a different set of ideas and beliefs, selectively remembered by Angela and placed in contexts that he himself would not choose.

Bruce is the sandpaper that helped me to explore and refine Maddie's arguments, and as such he needs to be honoured by being a character that I at least, as author, can love. However whether this comes across is something for readers to judge. In the small amount of space

available, I didn't do anything particular to make him appealing, I just changed my own attitude to him and wrote the scenes as if Angela loved him too.

For me, one of the benefits of writing fiction has been this need to keep extending myself in multiple directions. Certainly, being able to introduce and play with some very 'alternative' and overtly spiritual ideas about illness, the body and the 'self' (ideas that include the notion of a sixth sense) by giving them to Maddie, has opened the way and made it much easier for me to then introduce these ideas into my non-fiction writing, such as the exegesis. Bruce, however was also a vital ingredient in this process, providing an anchor for me to dominant cultural views which are still my inheritance, and still within me as a desire that I have to constantly contend with – the desire for order, for simple cures, for a cultural mainstream that is dependable and trustworthy, for a white knight to come and take control and bring salvation in times of crisis.

Fiction gives me a space in which I could allow these different views and impulses to take form in a less-threatening way, without having to subsume them into one non-contradictory underpinning logic, or to designate one of the other as necessarily wrong. What I can do, however, is suggest that one way of looking at it might have more consistency with a particular kind of overall aim. But as Maddie says, ultimately nothing is provable, there are no certainties, so in the end, after weighing up the evidence, you have to make your decisions according to your own past experiences, feelings and values. And this will differ for each person.

Other members of Angela's family mentioned include her **Gran**; her **Great Aunt Denise** (Maddie's mother, most famous for cutting the crutch out of her undies one year because, she said, it saved on washing); her **parents, eldest sister, and cousin Ben and his wife, Sally**, who live across the road and work on the family dairy farm during her childhood.

Wanda – is the new Artist in Residence at the State Library, working with a group of homeless people in the tunnels under the library helping them create their costumes for the party at the end of the Millennium. She is also Natalie's eldest sister. She has just recently arrived back in Australia after living overseas, mainly in the United States, since the mid-1960s.

History writing, like any social institution or consensus process, is an attempt to stabilise unstable and chaotic social and cultural formations. To give us stories to inform and back up the ways we choose to live. This tension between stability and change, conservation and

innovation is played out most visibly in the world of fashion. As a constitutive discourse and signifying practice, it inscribes bodies within culture as gendered, belonging to particular cultures, classes, age groups and functions, but it also constantly flirts with and disrupts these boundaries.

Fashion is a way of processing and playing with the spirit of the times. It is neither rational nor unitary. Indeed it could be seen as one of the most basic ways we play out our contradictions, indulge our non-rational natures, express and formulate our desires; with the runway as a place where the street, the theatre, and the gallery converge.

For Derrida: 'If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exist and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other.'[18]

So the party at the end of the Millennium becomes an opportunity to look over the cultural wardrobe, and decide what to wear (put up with or accept), and what it might be time to throw out or change.

Bob – (short for Roberta) is Angela's next-door neighbour and a tattoo artist. Bob brings into the mix a range of issues regarding body modification practices, the modern primitives movement, and bra wearing. Bob had terrible pain with fibrocystic breasts in her twenties, so she is an anti-bra campaigner now having found that by giving up bras both the pain and the lumps in her breasts disappeared. Working from notions of adornment, manipulation and mutilation (where adornment may or may not involve manipulation, which may or may not involve mutilation), Bob suggests that the most useful way of assessing the seriousness of a body modification is to look at whether it potentially deforms a major body system or function. By this definition, she argues that a bra is a much more serious and potentially deforming body modification – in the way it can impair the functioning of the lymphatic system – than tattoos. And yet ironically parents are usually eager to get their daughters into a bra, and horrified by tattoos.[19]

Zoe – Bob's flatmate, possibly a medical student.

Tony – Bob and Zoe's other flatmate, who works in a video shop. Tony becomes a volunteer research-assistant and brings over video copies of a range of films that feature famous scenes for underwear enthusiasts or historians (or feature the body parts that underwear brings into

focus). Tony's offerings range from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to *The Outlaw*, from *Working Girl* to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, from Mae West to Russ Myers.

Dora – Dora is the secretary of the Plastic Surgeon who owns the building that Angela, Gail and the others live in. She comes to collect the rent once a month.

Darcy – Later in the book, when Angela breaks up from Leo, she goes back onto a phone dating system and reconnects with Darcy, a man she's never met, but with whom she has an ongoing exchange of messages. Darcy has a very polymorphous perverse sexuality that revolves around his nipples and pre-cum. He speaks the body into existence, recreating it over and over again with his words and fantasies of touch.

Voices – Angela's chapters are intercut with other voices. These include the 'Bra wearer' that opens the novel; a Fitting Room Specialist; Cheryl (Angela's Barbie doll from her childhood); and a series of women who have had breast implants.

The *Silicone Dreams* series begins with a young girl hating her small breasts; then moves to a young woman on the eve of getting implants; a woman just after receiving implants and in love with her new breasts; one who has experienced complications such as capsular contraction; a woman who has fallen severely ill; and finally a woman after explantation.

Included in the samples is also a wad of notes from one of Wanda's Party workshop lectures (found in a rubbish bin), and various 'Invention of the Bra' and 'Great Moments in Underwear History' spots.

The voices and found texts provide a way to introduce counterpoint, variety, and different information and perspectives. Some other voices or texts that might be included in the final version of the novel include a seventeen year old in a girl's body who desperately wants the body of a boy and binds her breasts every day till they bleed (based on the documentary *Decision*[20]); a leaflet produced by Maddie's *Bust-Up* group about chemical contaminants and increased rates of cancer; an Astronaut in deep space (an opportunity to fantasise about the body without mirrors, both glass and human ones, cut off from social performance); Xanthe (Gail's baby – in another kind of deep space); the library ghost (a woman in Victorian attire apparently seen around the library for many years, who begin her monologue with, 'My girdle is killing me' after a famous advertisement from the 1960s); one of the two professional gorillas who live in the block of flats who likes to reminisce about his time on *Planet of the*

Apes and discuss various theories about the evolution of breasts and the enigma of male nipples; and one or more of the Party Workshoppers, talking about their chosen costumes.

Creating a research context, redefining the edges of a text

This novel is a cultural conversation that began before this project (exegesis and samples) and will continue after it.

In writing a novel like this – with bras and breasts as the general topic – I am creating a situation in which readers are brought into contact with information and ideas that they may not normally seek out, or that that they may not normally come across.

For instance, one of the things I would like to achieve is to get my readers involved in thinking about illness, and cancer in particular, and to think about it from the point of view of philosophical paradigms of illness and wholeness, while they are still well, rather than waiting until it happens to them and they are caught up in the maelstrom of medical effects and decisions. Or to think about gender in ways they may not have thought of before, or perhaps simply to remind them to keep thinking about it critically in the face of the barrage of recent popular media that promotes the notion of two innately distinct genders as if it were now a scientific given – as if we could ever objectively know what is possible (or 'natural') in this respect. Or to learn a bit about the extraordinary history of breast implants and the continuing controversy over their safety, and to think about how this relates to the production and reproduction of 'truth' in our culture, even though this is often shocking, challenging and unpalatable reading.

However if I want readers to be challenged and to spend time thinking about these complex and often confronting issues, then I need to create a context in which I can demonstrate my research and be accountable for the claims made in the text – that is, a context in which I can earn their trust. This seems to me particularly important if I am asking them to question a wide range of cultural authorities (such as certain cancer specialists and research institutions).

A good research context should be empowering for the reader. Knowing that they can check my sources – even if they don't – helps to keep me honest and on my toes. It also sets up a situation in which – if they don't like the world view that I'm presenting – there is a greater opportunity for readers to deconstruct or critique it, and to work out which parts or aspects they find suspect or untenable, and which parts to take on board. (Or a greater opportunity for reviewers and critics to do this on their behalf.)

A research base can also be a resource in itself, and this is another reason for creating links to the extraordinary amount of fascinating and striking material that I have come across in the course of writing this novel, but which is often hard to find or not well publicised.

Stories can be a powerful magic, and good referencing, like any other kind of writing, is an artform.

My topic has led me into some deep and serious issues, and I would like to raise these in such a way as to encourage a continuing cultural conversation about them, both within and across a range of extra-literary discourses.

There are three main ways in which I can do this.

First, a certain amount of tags or clues or sources can be dropped into the text – camouflaged within it, alluded to, attached to anecdotes or items, or planted in the background. (For instance the allusion to Maddie clutching Ralph Moss's *Questioning Chemotherapy* to her chest as a talisman in the small hours of the night, and the list of books standing guard on the bedside table or down beside the bed.)

Secondly, I can include a 'Sources' or 'Notes' section at the back of the novel.

This could be broken into chapter headings and provide details of references for specific claims or information presented in the text in a kind of prose version of endnotes. For instance, 'The quote from Audre Lorde is from *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1980) page 77.' Or: 'Regarding the chemical legacy of the Vietnam War, see *Battle's Poison Cloud* [documentary] Directed and produced by Cecile Trijssenaar, Tambuti Films, 2003.' For an example of this, see the 'Sources' for the novel chapters 4 and 5 at the end of the *Samples* section of this thesis.

Or the 'Sources and Notes' section could be more in the form of a general mini-bibliographical essay, and double as a 'further reading' resource. Thus it could include specific citations where needed (for quotes in the text, and so on), but have a more general listing of source material. For instance, 'Some of the books and articles Maddie found helpful in making her decisions about cancer treatment were…' This format would probably be a more suitable form for mainstream publishing. (For an example of this, see the 'Notes' sections in the back of *How to Conceive of a Girl*, 323-327.)

A third possibility is to publish specific chapters, or arrangements of novel material, as fully footnoted journal articles. For an example of this, see 'The Milk of Humankind-ness' in the *Samples* section of this thesis, which was published in *Australian Feminist Studies* in 2004.[21]

Finally, if I want to create the possibility for my research and methods to be analysed and investigated, and thus increase the novel's cultural weight and its ability to enter into a broader range of discourses, I can create a companion website. On this I could publish a full bibliography, annotated reading lists, and a more complete version of the endnote essays on the internet, with directions to this website in the acknowledgments in the printed book.

Indeed, once I stop thinking about this novel (or this thesis) as an isolated text-object, but think of it more as a text-event – one which can give rise to and opportunities for other events – then the possibilities start to multiply.

The novel as book is thus only one potential outcome of the novel as a research project – or the novel as a research *technology*. As well as being the basis for this Ph.D. thesis, in the future it could also be a springboard for a range of other text-events. These could include journal articles, newspaper columns, interviews, radio scripts, soundworks, as well as a companion website that forms the nexus for all these, linking it in with other cultural conversations on similar topics, keeping it circulating, and allowing a dialogue to form around it.[22]

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

[2] See for instance, Hayden White, 'An Old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science?' *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 4.3 (2000): 399. Stephen Muecke, 'Experimental History?' *Australian Humanities Review* (July 1996) 10 Feb.1998 <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-July-1996/muecke.html>. Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber, 1987). Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London/New York : Routledge, 2003).

[3] Cited by Jenkins, *Refiguring History,* 41.

[4] For an interesting discussion of the 'correspondence' versus 'coherence' theories of history writing, see the archives of the Ebla Forum for August 2004, 2 Nov. 2005 <http://www.eblaforum.org/main/viewtopic.php?t=643&sid=91bf61f2a3b1d564e0f477124c54e6bb>. Also see Alun Munslow, 'Review of *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* by Professor Arthur Marwick,' 4 Jun. 2005 <http://www.history.ac.uk/projects/discourse/munslow5.html>.

[5] Music history documentaries are an excellent example of the way the same historical terrain can be mapped (or played or redescribed) in multiple valuable and evocative ways, and still be coherent with the traces. For example, see recent documentaries shown on Australian television such as *Get Up, Stand Up; The Voice; The Blues; Dancing in the Street; Walk On By;* and *Long Way to the Top.*

[6] Paul Carter, speaking on a panel on *Awaye,* ABC Radio National, 27 Jan. 2006.

[7] Deepak Chopra, *The Book of Secrets: Unlocking the Hidden Dimensions of Your Life* (NY: Three Rivers Press, 2004) 25.

[8] Alexander Kluge cited in James Franklin, *New German Cinema* (London: Columbus Books, 1986) 69.

[9] Published by Vintage, Random House Australia in 1996.

[10] My first radio feature was a cultural history the 1960s children's television series *Adventure Island,* produced with Claudia Taranto for ABC Radio National in 1991. My book of poetry *Things in a Glass Box* was published by SCARP/Five Islands Press in 1994. Poems from this book were produced with soundscapes in collaboration with sound-artist Stuart Ewings for broadcast on *Poetica*, ABC Radio National, 11 Dec. 2004, and are also included on my CD *Body of Words* (Melb: Dogmedia, 2004) along with a collection of other radio essays and pieces.

[11] For more about the effects of being a part of the first television generation, see my column 'X-ed Again, or Whatever Happened to the Seventies', *Australian Book Review* ,176 (Dec. 1995). Also see Pagan Kennedy, 'Ring My Bellbottoms: Fondue Memories of the Disco Decade', *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, Dec. 1991.

[12] See Vera Whisman, 'Choosing a Story' from *Queer By Choice* (1996), reprinted in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, Eds., *Gender: A Sociological Reader* (London & NY: Routledge, 2002) 342, 359.

[13] Research for the character of James included numerous first-person books and biographical documentaries, websites and articles (see bibliography). I am particularly indebted to articles by Veronica Vera, Norie-Mae Welby and others in Jo-Anne Baker, Ed., *Sex Tips: Advice From Women Experts From Around the World* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999).

[14] For detailed observation and analysis of children Ruby's age and their attitudes to gender distinctions, see Bronwyn Davies, *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) and *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993).

[15] For instance, see the two-part documentary *Decision: The Wrong Body* (UK: Windfall Films/Channel 4,1995) about a group of adolescents seeking female-to-male hormone treatment and/or surgery, who talk about having 'known' since they first began talking that they were male. Also see interview with Zachary Nataf about this film, *Tokyo International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival website*, 28 Mar. 2006 <http://www.tokyo-gff.org/99/English/interview/zacharynataf.html>

[16] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (NY/London: Routledge, 1994) 234.

[17] See Bornstein, ibid., for a wonderfully fluid discussion of this issue.

[18] Cited in Jenkins, *Refiguring History*, 22, n 12.

[19] See the discussion of body modifications, and the possible negative health effects of wearing bras for long periods, in the last part of the novel samples, a hybrid piece called 'From the "Primitive Droop" to the Civilised "Thrust": Towards a Politics of Body Modifications'.

[20] *Decision: The Wrong Body*.

[21] *Australian Feminist Studies, Meanings of Breastmilk: New Feminist Flavours* (Guest editors: Alison Bartlett and Fiona Giles) 19. 45 (Nov 2004) 315-327.

[22] I have been awarded a Fellowship for 2006 from the Literature Board of the Australia Council to expand and complete the novel for mainstream publication, and to develop ideas for these kinds of multi-media spin-offs. This will be the next stage after completing this dissertation. I already have a website that functions in this way for my previous work, at <http://www.bethspencer.com>. However I would envisage a website that grew out of this research project to be much more directly focussed on specific issues, such as cancer treatments, the safety of breast implants, body modifications, bras and health, fashion history, environmental issues and so on, with extensive links to and from other sites.