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***Treading Air*: using historical fiction to explore women's criminality and sexuality in the interwar period**

Abstract:

In this paper, I use a practice-led research methodology to reflect on the dilemmas of representing women's sexuality in *Treading Air* (forthcoming 2016), a novel of historical fiction. The creative work is based on the life of Lizzie O'Dea, alias Betty Knight, who lived in Townsville and Brisbane during the interwar period. I uncovered Lizzie O'Dea's story in the National Library of Australia's digitised newspaper archives. Lizzie's criminal record was described as 'unenviable' (*Townsville Daily Bulletin* 5 Aug, 1928). Many of Lizzie O'Dea's crimes in Townsville occurred in or around The Causeway Hotel and Heraud Street, known as a red light district. The newspaper articles reveal that, as a criminal and prostitute, Lizzie O'Dea was subject to a set of discourses that, at once, exposed her to the public gaze and excluded her from the 'proper' realm of the domestic housewife. However, the decade of the 1920s was one of shifting attitudes towards sexuality, particularly as a result of women's suffrage, which lobbied against the earlier view that sex work was a necessary evil, advocating instead that conditions for women could be improved by giving women equal wages (Frances 2007). This paper proposes that fiction, as Greenblatt (1998: 525) conceives of it, is a space to 'survey a complex new world, testing upon it dark thoughts without damaging the order those thoughts would seem to threaten'. The paper demonstrates how the tensions between discourses of women's criminality and sexuality can be explored through the representations of a historical figure based on newspaper articles found in the archives.

Biographical note:

Ariella Van Luyn is a lecturer in writing at James Cook University, Townsville. She completed her PhD in creative writing at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2012. Her PhD investigated how fiction can inform the project of oral history in Australia. The manuscript from the PhD was shortlisted for the Queensland Literary Awards 2012. Her research interests include historical fiction, practice-led research, community narratives and regional writing communities. Her short stories have appeared in *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Voiceworks*, *Spineless Wonders* and *The Lifted Brow*. Her novel, *Treading Air*, is out July 2016.

Keywords:

Historical fiction – interwar period – women’s stories – practice-led research

Introduction

Historical fiction in Australia has long occupied a precarious position. Inga Clendinnen (2006: 26) argues that novelists' imaginations cannot adequately represent the past because contemporary obsessions and assumptions are imposed on the representations. However, Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction (1988) demonstrates that postmodern novelists are acutely aware of the impossibility of fully grasping the past, and use fiction to draw attention to the narrative construction of history. Historical fiction can thus be a means to reflect on how both historical fiction writers and historians know about the past, and the narrative choices they make in representing it. These notions were particularly relevant during the construction of my historical novel, *Treading Air* (forthcoming 2016). *Treading Air* is based on a real historical figure, Elizabeth O'Dea. Elizabeth O'Dea was a petty thief and sex worker. Aspects of her life in Townsville and Brisbane, Queensland, between the 1920s and 1940s, are described in digitised newspaper articles available from the National Library of Australia. In this paper, self-reflective practice, a key methodology of practice-led research (Haseman 2006) is used to analyse how this work of historical fiction explores the power structures that shape women's lives. By drawing attention to the novel's intertextuality, particularly its reliance on newspaper articles, and creating a character based on both historical and contemporary understandings of women's criminality and sexuality, this kind of historical fiction can create a form of historical agency.

New historicism, women's stories and historical agency

Historical novels are constructions of the present that reflect on the past. In highlighting how power structures serve to shape the construction of historical events, particularly by telling women's stories, historical novels speak to both contemporary and historical concerns. Anne Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2004) argue that history is 'always there and always here; although we do not repeat it directly, we nonetheless live its consequences every moment.' Novels that re-write history from a feminist point of view, or draw attention to stories that are little-known or silenced in wider historical narratives, 'question the aspects of reader's comfortably held views of the past' (138). So, 'while historians can argue of the precise meaning of an event or series of events, the novelist can place them in an entirely new, frequently ironic, light' (138). This gives historical novelists the opportunity to explore how the past is known and told, and whose voices have been erased, silenced or marginalised. Therefore, although historical fiction can be playful, it has strong political resonances, particularly for women, who can be written back into the historical record (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2004: 142). This was the case during the writing of *Treading Air*.

While in the early stages of writing the novel, I began with, as Atwood (1998) describes, 'hints and images and scenes and voices, rather than theories and grand schemes' (1512), a larger pattern did emerge. Stephen Greenblatt offers a means to understand the construction of the main character, Lizzie O'Dea, in the text and how these wider patterns of power were maintained and resisted in the society she occupied. Greenblatt suggests fiction can function as a space for both enacting and

resisting power structures. As Maza (2004) observes, Greenblatt ‘describe[s] and illustrate[s] the point that literature and the social are always simultaneously engaged in acts of mutual creation’ (253). Being a product of the present that attempts to represent the past, historical fiction can draw attention to how narratives are at once shaped by social structures and are shaping them.

Such an awareness can function as a form of historical agency, which den Heyer and Fidyk (2007) define as ‘an imaginative capacity for shaping intentions, forming choices and undertaking action’ (145). According to den Heyer and Fidyk (2007) ‘agency involves the active interpretation of experience, the application of lessons to present socially interpreted situations’ (145). den Heyer and Fidyk (2007) argue that historical fiction can be a means of historical agency because it helps ‘inform consideration of the inner life of historical fact’ (154). Historical fiction can also offer ‘a rich perspective on the meanings of past lives’ and illuminate ‘patterns that exist in human motivation, action and cohabitation’ (154). The construction of Lizzie O’Dea in *Treading Air* demonstrates a way historical fiction can be a means of reflecting on the power structures inherent in the discourses around women’s criminality and sexuality, and how past women’s lives are known and constructed.

Uncovering Elizabeth O’Dea: a troubling presence in the archives

Treading Air, currently in manuscript form, is based on the story of Elizabeth O’Dea, discovered in the National Library of Australia digitised newspaper archives. Elizabeth O’Dea had several aliases, including the playful moniker of Betty Knight (*Brisbane Courier*, 27 November 1929), as well as Elizabeth O’Brian, Stewart and Johnston (*Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 29 November 1924). I uncovered Lizzie O’Dea’s story two years ago while researching the local history of Townsville, Queensland. The National Library’s sophisticated search functions allowed a tracing of Lizzie O’Dea’s life as it appeared in the articles. Elizabeth O’Dea first appeared in the newspapers in March 1924, when, at the age of 27, she was charged with having broken a hurricane lamp in Innisfail. O’Dea claimed she remembered nothing about the incident (*Cairns Post*, 12 March 1924). In November of the same year, she was charged with attempting to kill a woman, Dolly Franks, who stole 19 pounds from Thelma Grant. Franks was shot in the thumb; the wounds were not considered serious (*Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 6 December 1924).

In 1925, O’Dea was sentenced to one year’s hard labour. Her record showed 63 convictions (*Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 12 February 1925). In 1927, O’Dea was charged with setting fire to a neighbour’s house but was not convicted (*Brisbane Courier*, 21 April 1927). At various other times, O’Dea was charged with breaking taxi cab windows (*Brisbane Courier*, 14 August 1929 and 22 October 1928); stealing from men drinking in hotels (*Brisbane Courier*, 27 November 1928, 31 January 1929, 14 August 1929, 27 November 1929, 25 March 1930, 30 December 1936); using obscene language (*Brisbane Courier*, 27 October 1929, 25 March 1930); and tearing a constable’s coat (*Brisbane Courier*, 13 November 1932). One article, titled ‘Elizabeth’s Embrace, Gaol the Sequel’, describes her approaching a man in a drinking parlour, putting her arms around him and hugging him. ‘While embracing

[him], she took his watch and chain' (*Sunday Mail*, 5 August 1928). She also behaved in a similar manner on other occasions, once sitting on a man's knee and stealing from him (*Brisbane Courier*, 31 January 1929), and another time, saying 'Oh Dad, are you going to shout for me?' and then stealing from the man (*Brisbane Courier*, 25 March 1930). During the Second World War, she was charged with having in her possession goods stolen from the US Army, including five blankets, a bed sheet and two tins of beef (*Brisbane Courier*, 3 October 1944). A judge described her criminal record as 'unenviable' (*Sunday Mail*, 5 August 1928). The only other reference to Lizzie, and her husband, Joseph O'Dea, appears in James Morton and Susanna Lobez's *Gangland Queensland* (2012: 13), where Morton and Lobez add that her husband worked as a debt collector in Townsville, and that Elizabeth and Joe held their wedding breakfast at a pie stall and ate sausage rolls. I felt compelled to write about the O'Deas and to develop my previous writing practice that draws on oral history and archival materials to produce historical fiction (Van Luyn 2013).

Lizzie's story is compelling just as much for what is not said as what is. Linda Orr (2005) states that 'historians are often drawn to a history that seems lost, unreadable, absent: the challenge, the quest for the evanescent' (267). As mentioned above, fiction can be a space for testing troubling hypotheses (Greenblatt 1998: 524). Writing a novel that allowed me to fill in the gaps of Lizzie's story might be one way of making sense of her troubling presence in the archives. The historical fiction form allowed speculation about who she was outside of her representation in the archives, how she came to be in Townsville, and why she shot a woman for stealing someone else's money. Additional research also revealed many of her petty crimes in Townsville occurred in or around The Causeway Hotel.

The Causeway Hotel no longer exists. An empty space of dirt at the corner of a busy intersection marks its absence. Many of the newspaper articles from Lizzie's time in Townsville describe her activities taking place in Heraud Street, which ran behind The Causeway. Like the hotel, this street is not present on any contemporary maps. Heraud Street was known as a red light district (*Townsville Bulletin*: n.d.). Based on the available evidence, it is likely that Lizzie was a sex worker.

Understanding the newspaper articles and their use in historical fiction

The newspaper articles reveal that, because Lizzie O'Dea was involved in sex work and petty crimes, she was subject to a set of discourses that, at once, exposed her to the public gaze and excluded her from the 'proper' realm of the domestic housewife. In many of the articles, the details of Lizzie O'Dea's crimes are described in a manner reminiscent of a scene in fiction. Indeed, Kerry Wimshurst (1999) notes that newspaper stories about women criminals in the 1930s were 'the equivalents of modern police dramas in terms of crime entertainment' (4). The descriptions feature dialogue and a sense of narrative progression. For example, the extract below comes from an article in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (6 December 1927), and describes Lizzie O'Dea's involvement in the shooting of Dolly Franks, who stole 19 pounds from Thelma Grant:

In the Police Court on Friday, before Mr. R. Curtis, P.M., Elizabeth O’Dea and Thelma Grant...appeared on a charge of unlawfully attempting to kill one Dolly Franks...Constable J. A. Smith, recalled, gave evidence as to seeing defendant O’Dea and Dolly Franks at the Causeway Hotel at about 8.30 on the night of December 27th.

Dolly Franks said to him: ‘I want to give that woman in charge. She has shot me.’ Witness asked defendant if this was true, and she admitted it was.

Franks then said to him: ‘Look out! She has got the revolver now.’

O’Dea had her hands behind her back and he saw her put her right hand in a pocket in the front of her dress. He grabbed her hand and pulled it out of the pocket. In it was a revolver wrapped in a handkerchief. He took the revolver from her and then put her in a motor car in which Dolly Franks was sitting.

He heard O’Dea say to Franks: ‘Why should I shoot you? I don’t know you.’

He went in the car to Heraud street, Hermit Park, and saw the defendant Thelma Grant lying on the ground. She was drunk. He arrested her and put her in the car...

Grant said to Brooks... ‘You copper — —’

Lizzie O’Dea said to her: ‘I am pinched for shooting Madge.’

Grant replied: ‘I — well shot Madge. You took the revolver from me.’

O’Dea said: ‘That’s right, I took the revolver off you.’

Witness took the defendants to the police station. Later on he and Detective McCarthy went to the house and found a flattened leaden bullet on the floor. The revolver which he produced contained five live cartridges and two empty shells. The revolver was a seven-chambered double action Young American type.

Mr. Ryan: It wouldn’t kill anyone?

The P.M.: I don’t know. I wouldn’t like to stand in front of it.

Mr. Ryan: I know of a case where five shots were fired with one of these into a woman’s head without killing her.

The P.M.: She must have had a particularly thick skull or else no brains...

This extract provides an example of a complex set of discourses involved in the representation of Lizzie O’Dea in the newspaper articles. In order to represent Lizzie in my historical fiction, these representations, which are one of the only available clues to Lizzie’s life in Townsville and Brisbane, need to be unpacked.

While the newspaper articles provided the basis for Lizzie’s character in *Treading Air*, these sources could not be taken at face value. As Margaret Atwood (1998: 1515) says of the newspaper and other accounts that inform her novel about a criminal woman, *Alias Grace*:

For each story there was a teller, but—as is true of all stories—there was also an audience; both were influenced by the received climate of politics, and also about

criminality and its proper treatment, about the nature of women—their weaknesses and seductive qualities for instance...(Atwood 1998: 1515).

In the newspaper article above, for example, there is a sense that the author is writing an unfolding narrative; the use of dialogue, particularly the exclaimed ‘Look out!’, adds tension to the story. Although Lizzie is largely silent in the account – and indeed in many of the newspaper articles – what she does say is constructed to sound suspicious. The fact that she had the gun in her possession, and that she was later convicted, makes her protests of not knowing Dolly seem unconvincing. In addition, her interaction with the inebriated Thelma is presented as a performance for the benefit of the police officer; O’Dea’s ‘that’s right’ seems to have an artificial ring to it.

The details provided also construct O’Dea and Grant as figures of amusement. Grant is not just drunk, but ‘lying on the ground’. In addition, the magistrate’s apparently humorous comments about not wanting to stand in front of a gun, and the woman’s thick skull or lack of brains, demonstrate the case was presented as amusing rather than serious. It is significant that the inspector says he knew a case of a woman, not a man or a person. While it is possible the inspector did indeed know of a case of a woman who survived, the judge’s levity makes light of the story and implies the woman is stupid or thick. This gives the whole story a tone of light-heartedness that does not reflect the significant impact the event would have had on Lizzie O’Dea’s life; she was sentenced to one year’s hard labour in Stewart Creek Gaol, Townsville. The newspaper articles are thus suspicious sources because they trivialise and sensationalise Lizzie’s experiences.

In addition, using the articles as the basis of historical fiction is rendered difficult because Lizzie’s voice is largely absent from the archives; as in the above example, and in most of the articles, the reader only hears her voice as reported by a witness or police officer. At no point do the papers provide descriptions of her motivations, feelings or past experiences that cause her to engage in criminal activity. Margaret Atwood states, referring to Canadian historical fiction: ‘It’s the very things that aren’t mentioned that inspire the most curiosity in us. *Why aren’t they mentioned?*’ (1998: 1509, italics in original). Like Atwood, I was curious about the unmentioned aspects of Lizzie’s life and her silences. Unable to recover any more historical artefacts that could offer insights into these gaps in the record, fiction became a space to draw attention to the hidden aspects of Lizzie’s life narrative.

This motivation situates the novel within a tradition of what Nunning (1997) describes as ‘revisionist historical novels’ (222), which are ‘inspired by the wish to rewrite history, particularly from the point of view of those all too long ignored by traditional historiography’. Revisionist historical novels approach the past from a feminist point of view (Nunning 1997: 223); they ‘describe and polemicize not only the discrimination against women in former periods, but also against the thoroughness of the erasure of women from the historical records’ (223). However, the novel can never fully capture Lizzie’s voice and experiences. Rather, as Nunning (1997) suggests, revisionist historical novels ‘suggest there is not a single truth about the past, only a series of versions...it is not the factual existence of past events that these

novels call into question, but only [hu]man's ability to know the true course of history' (231). The novel thus operates as a space to draw attention to the suspicious nature of the newspaper articles and the unsaid aspects of the narrative, rather than to speak for Lizzie.

In order to achieve this in *Treading Air*, I include extracts from actual newspaper articles and compare that with the fictional Lizzie's own knowledge and experience of the events they describe. For example, in the novel, after Lizzie is imprisoned for shooting Dolly, her lover, McWilliams reads her the actual article describing the incident. In the novel, the shooting becomes about Lizzie's self-preservation, rather than the almost humorous affair constructed in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*. Incorporating actual newspaper articles into the novel highlights the process of constructing the past from these unreliable sources. As Evelyn O'Callaghan (1993) says of another historical novel, this allows the text to draw 'attention to its own intertextuality: the connection between fictional narratives and its historical source documents' (42). In including the original sources and juxtaposing them with an imagined narrative 'our attention is drawn to the storylike qualities of the originals' (42). *Treading Air* highlights not only the unreliability of the sources that served as a basis for the text, but also to the discourses that constructed Lizzie's criminality as well as her sexuality.

Understanding the historical context: sex work in Australia and Queensland

In order to understand Lizzie's presentation in the newspapers, and to construct her character in historical fiction, I considered the historical context of sex work in Australia, and the questions that arise when representing a sex worker. This understanding allowed me to use, as Greenblatt (1998) states, fiction as a space to 'survey a complex new world, testing upon it dark thoughts without damaging the order those thoughts would seem to threaten' (525). Lizzie's narrative raises complex questions about women's sexuality in relation to sex work. In the novel, this allowed an examination of how the tensions in attitudes towards women's sexuality and to sex work in the past could become a site to explore contemporary feminist notions.

In the past, prostitution was considered a necessary evil in Australian society, to 'contain the lusts of the men' (Frances 2007: 21). In the early 1900s however, there was increasing concern about the public display of prostitution and pimping (Frances 2007: 71). By the 1920s, the women's suffrage movement argued that rather than tolerate prostitution, conditions could be improved by giving women equal wages. This resulted in a change of attitudes towards sex workers. Increasingly, they were subjected to industry regulations. While on the one hand, sex workers were increasingly surveilled, regulated and imprisoned, particularly in Queensland, the 1920s saw a change in attitude to sex in the figure of the flapper. This 'modern young woman challenged notions of traditional respectable femininity' (Frances 2007: 248). Lizzie's story can be situated and understood within these discourses – in the 1920s, sex workers could potentially either be regulated or liberated. The representations of Lizzie therefore needed to be fluid enough to explore these conflicting visions of the sex worker and to deeply understand the historical conditions of sex work.

Many powerful factors and structures would have influenced a woman's decision to become a sex worker. It is important not to imply that Lizzie does, or could, represent the experiences of all female sex workers. Rather, her individual narrative offers one imagined version of a sex worker's experience in the 1920s, contrasted with other character's experiences, circumstances and attitudes in the novel. In Australia, women became prostitutes under degrees of coercion. For some, particularly Indigenous women, prostitution was little more than sexual slavery. In other instances, women turned to prostitution as a result of financial pressures (Frances 2007). In the novel, I draw attention to the financial freedom that sex work allowed women, based on actual numbers.

Women also have vastly different experiences in the sex industry depending on whether they work in the street or in a brothel. With an absence of many women's voices from the 1920s, it is difficult to know if sexual liberation or pleasure was an element of their choosing to work in the sex industry. However, some contemporary sex workers express feelings of liberation. The stories from men and women working as contemporary sex workers voiced in *Whores and Other Feminists* (1997) highlight the complex interaction of coercion and liberation many sex workers experience. While this may be a result of contemporary attitudes, it is impossible to discount the notion that some female sex workers in the past may have enjoyed their work.

These complex historical and feminist understandings of women's sex work informed the development of Lizzie's character in *Treading Air*. Lizzie experiences a range of emotions about her work. In the novel, she is often confused: she enjoys the financial freedom, sexual contact and admiration of certain of her clients, but also experiences disrespect and abuse. I used an intimate third person narrator to create an ironic gap between Lizzie and the narrator's vision of her work, which allows an exploration of Lizzie's thoughts and the limitations of her vision as she struggles with conflicting social attitudes to sex work.

Conclusion

The process of writing *Treading Air* demonstrates that the central character of Lizzie O'Dea is an interweaving of an historical figure that emerges from newspaper articles, historical understandings, and cotemporary notions surrounding women's sexuality and sex work. Producing the historical novel *Treading Air*, and reflecting on the construction of the character of Lizzie O'Dea, functions as a way of thinking through notions of women's sex work and criminality in the present as they are informed by the past. By drawing attention to the narrative qualities of the newspaper articles that reveal certain aspects of Lizzie's life; representing the power structures that shape Lizzie's decision to become a sex worker; and her ways of making sense of her experiences in the industry, the text allows contemporary readers to consider how we understand women's experiences in the past. This is a form of historical agency: the ability to imaginatively understand how social structures can shape representations and also be resisted.

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