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The case of the disappearing twin: How writing brought me closer to my self

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Abstract: Using writing as a means of inquiry, I aim to analyse a change over-time in my creative writing and consider what this change tells me about myself. In doing so, I endeavour to explore creative writing as both a research and a therapeutic tool and to be innovative in the presentation of research. I intend to encourage all therapists, academics and researchers to uninhibitedly dive into their creative selves in order to become more reflexive and gain understanding, as well as for the pure enjoyment of it.

Keywords: Writing as inquiry, creative writing, therapeutic creative writing, reflexivity, integration

I am a writer. I write creative non-fiction (both academic and not), fiction and poetry. I write for an audience, I write to understand myself better, I write for the pure joy of it. I aim, through workshops and articles, to show that, when writing for reflexive or research purposes, we need not lose our enjoyment in the written word. Indeed, maintaining a pleasure in the writing can bring a richness to the enquiry and the text which keeps us and any potential reader engaged.

In this article I explore my own experience of creative writing and of using writing to reflect on that creative writing in order to learn something about me. In doing so, I hope to inspire therapists, academics and researchers to be more confident in using creative writing as a method of inquiry. Without being proscriptive I will offer some guidelines on how creative writing might become both a tool of research and a therapeutic asset.

Method

I have been inspired to assert writing as a method of inquiry by Laurel Richardson. Since the early 1990s, Richardson has been arguing that we discover through writing. It is not something to be done once the thinking has happened, but writing is a way of enriching thinking, tying it down, it is a way of knowing in and of itself. She posits writing as a method of inquiry is particularly suited to the contemporary postmodern, poststructuralist environment, where “[b]ecause the individual is subject to multiple and competing discourses in many realms, one’s subjectivity is shifting and contradictory – not stable, fixed, and rigid” (Richardson, 2018, p.821).

Specifically, poststructuralism suggests two important ideas to qualitative writers. First, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular

positions at specific times. Second it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone. Nurturing our own voices releases the censorious hold of “science writing” on our consciousness as well as the arrogance it fosters in our psyche; writing is validated as a method of knowing (Richardson, 2018, p.821).

So much for the theory, for the *raison d’être*. What does doing writing as a method of inquiry actually mean in practice? For me, the crucial starting point is creative (rather than any other type of) writing. What do I mean by creative writing? Creative writing is attentive to word choice, word order, word repetition, rhythm, metaphor, point-of-view. It encompasses deeply sensual descriptions (using the five physical senses – taste, smell, texture, what we hear, what we see). It welcomes in emotion.

Starting with the creative is key. As Furman puts it: “The arts, which allow for the expression of feelings that might not have been previously clear even to research participants, create a space for an interactional process of discovery” (Furman, 2006, p.561). In *The Strange Case of the Disappearing Twin*, the creative writing illuminated an integration process within myself of which I was not entirely aware.

In order to nourish the creative which I believe is in all of us, I suggest:

- Finding the space physically, psychologically and emotionally.
- Giving ourselves permission to explore, make mistakes, play.
- Buy a writing journal and encourage a writing habit with regular short bursts of free writing. Free writing is explained further down in this article. For other ideas on encouraging a writing habit see: <https://scarboroughmysteries.com/2019/01/14/a-writers-toolkit-getting-started>

Once we have some creative writing relatively freely written, the next step in writing as a method of inquiry is to re-read and write some more, this time reflexively. Writing reflexively raises “researcher self-awareness” (Finlay, 2011, p. 23). I use what Thompson (2004, p.82) calls “completing the loop”. I write about my creative writing using such prompts as “When I read this I notice...”, “When I read this I am surprised that...” Through following these prompts, there is a recognition, a naming and an owning of what has transpired in the writing. It is iterative, dynamic, evolving, with each new writing revealing new meaning (Evans, 2013, p.5).

This produces what Richardson calls “writing stories”. These “offer critical reflexivity about the writing self in different

context” which is a “valuable creative analytical practice” (Richardson, 2018, p.824). In my case it helped me understand about an evolution within myself. It also set me wondering whether my experience of creative writing followed by reflexive writing could be an exemplar for others hoping to explore writing as a method of inquiry. Hence this article.

An Example of a “Writing Story”

The Strange Case of the Disappearing Twin

The light sparks off the diamonds, is reflected by the cut crystal, creating ephemeral rainbows across the damask cloth. The fire crackles. The air is scented by expensive perfumes and aftershave. Some of the assembled company stand or sit to attention, while others lounge, on the plush furnishings. These have been pulled into a circle around the crimson rug bought many years ago in an Egyptian bazaar. The company is an assortment of young and old, of men and women, all dressed for dinner: jackets of crushed velvet, silk dresses, furs. They are all waiting for an answer, “What has happened to the twin?” The detectives – Lord Peter Wimsey, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot¹ (take your pick) – are unable to say. The twin has simply disappeared.

I live with depression and writing has become part of my life-approach to maintain my sense of well-being. I discovered its importance to me in this regard during a particularly low point about sixteen years ago. Up until then, writing had been a pleasure, as well as a career choice. However, it wasn’t until the turning of the century that I realised it could be a means to greater self-understanding and reflection which could aid me in my healing.

When I had the wherewithal to investigate, I, of course, discovered a wealth of information about writing as a type of therapy. And why not? We have art, music, drama therapies. Despite having no formal status in the UK, writing therapy has plenty of practitioners and advocates (see www.lapidus.org.uk).

American psychologist, James W Pennebaker began to consider aspects of what he calls ‘expressive’ writing in the 1980s. However, it is possible to argue the tradition of words being a source of healing goes much further back through the use of prayer, spells and charms (Mazza, 2003). Pennebaker carried out controlled experiments on his students, inviting some to write over a period of five days about emotions and events which had an impact on them, while others wrote

¹ Detectives created by D.L. Sayers and Agatha Christie.

about subject which did not evoke a strong reaction in them. Those in the former group reported feeling better and also had less frequent appointments with the medical centre (Pennebaker and Beale, 1986; Pennebaker, 1997). Since this first research, Pennebaker and others have sought to replicate the results and also pin down the components of the writing which gives it its potency (Smyth and Pennebaker, 2008).

One aspect is the cathartic effect of releasing thoughts and emotions through 'free writing'. The aim of free writing as defined by Goldberg (1986, pp.8-9) is to: "burn through to first thoughts ... to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel", to "explore the rugged edge of thought." The word "free" here has two aspects. It means putting to one side, for the present, learned rules about writing and setting down whatever comes to mind without judging, censoring or editing. In addition, the writing is freed from an external reader. Only the author will see what has been produced and will decide what to do with it.

This was a response to free writing garnered from the participant of my 2011 phenomenological case study:

And I think I've probably described the free writing as being like ploughing a field and literally to me it's like that. A field's got a load of plants on or a load of top soil on, and you don't quite know what's underneath, you can guess, but there's so much going on underneath the now of the mind, that it's very difficult to find out what you really think about things underneath. And the creative writing, the free writing, tends to dip down underneath the surface and pull things up and it's almost like ploughing things up and exposing them and it's almost, like aha, I knew it was there, I don't know quite why I didn't think of it before (Evans, 2011, p.180).

However, this is only the beginning of what could be a very extensive tale.

Writing Creatively

The writing of my 2004 novel was very free-flowing and was undoubtedly releasing for me. The experience of depression of the point-of-view character, Hannah, is very similar to mine. And Hannah has a controlling 'twin'.

When she breathes Hannah knows she takes oxygen away from her twin. She is equally as certain that Clare will punish her for this. The hand, which looks so remarkably like Hannah's own, drags the razor blade across her arm. She watches the blood bubble up in its wake. The pain only begins when she gets back under the duvet (Evans, 2004, unpublished).

Twins have a long heritage in literature and story-telling. I remember as quite a young person being riveted by a 1946 film being reprised on TV. It was *The Dark Mirror* (directed by Robert Siodmak). It stars Olivia de Havilland who plays both twins, Terry and Ruth Collins. They turn out to be identical in looks but exact opposites in character and moral code. Almost two hundred years before, Robert Louis Stevenson was exploring a similar idea in his 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Twins turn up in legend and folk tales: Jacob and Esau; Romulus and Remus; Snow-White and Rose-Red; some versions of Sleeping Beauty where the wicked and good fairies are twins or sisters. Shakespeare (himself a father to twins, one of whom died as a child) fashioned a plethora of plays where twins have a central role.

In one way or another, these story-tellers from the ancient to the modern, were, at least in part, exploring what Carl Jung later gave a name to. He called it the 'shadow side'. He postulated that, psychologically speaking, there is a shadow side in all of us which, if it remains unacknowledged, can wreak havoc for ourselves and others.

This was an aspect to Clare, the twin I created for Hannah. At the time, I had just discovered the poet Anne Sexton and her poem, *The Other* (Sexton, 1974, p.32) resonated powerfully with me.

...
It is waiting.
Mr. Doppelgänger. My brother. My spouse.
Mr. Doppelgänger. My enemy. My lover.
When truth comes spilling out like peas
it hangs up the phone.
When the child is soothed and resting on the breast
it is my other who swallows Lysol.
...
It cries and cries and cries
until I put on a painted mask
and leer at Jesus in His passion.
Then it giggles.
It is a thumbscrew.

Clare is unquestionably a 'thumbscrew' on Hannah and on her capacity for enjoying life or relationships.

However, Clare may spring from something else. Atwood suggests twins have a particular significance for writers. "All writers are double," she says (Atwood, 2003, p.32). Within a writer there are twins, the twin who lives and the twin who writes. She calls the latter, "the Hyde hand", "the slippery double" and says, "The double may be shadowy, but it is also indispensable."

The writer's "double" watches, it observes, even when the writer or someone close to them is in enormous pain. This twin takes the chaotic, the disorganised, the meaningless and gives

it shape, a narrative, an understanding. The writing twin steals indiscriminately. Irish novelist, Colm Tóibín, once told a class he was teaching:

You have to be a terrible monster to write. I said, "Someone might have told you something they shouldn't have told you, and you have to be prepared to use it because it will make a great story. You have to use it even though the person is identifiable. If you can't do it then writing isn't for you. You've no right to be here. If there is any way I can help you get into law school then I will. Your morality will be more useful in a courtroom." (Tóibín, 2016a).

Clare was a particularly malicious double. Yet she was also a critique par excellence, hard-nosed and distant. Attributes which can, at times, be helpful to the writer.

But in the re-formation of my novel I killed off Clare. And quite unconsciously. How did that happen?

In 2012, circumstances allowed me to think about fulfilling a long-held ambition, to publish a novel. I suddenly had the time and some financial security, and I gave myself permission to be "the monster" Tóibín has so accurately described.

I knew my 2004 novel was un-publishable, it had a scanty plot and less structure. But it was a starting point. I then took a very pragmatic decision. In the re-crafting, I would use the crime mystery genre. This genre gave me a structure to work towards, it is one I know well as I have loved reading crime fiction since I was in my teens. Plus crime fiction is a fast-selling genre and framing my novel within it would make it more straight forward to market.

I was off, and worked relatively quickly as I already had the setting, most of the characters and bits of the story. I was able to publish *The Art of the Imperfect* at the end of 2014. It took me a while to notice Clare was missing and that this has meaning for me and my writing doppelgänger.

In the ten years between 2004 and 2014, I was also coming to an understanding of how the therapeutic impact of creative writing goes far beyond the catharsis of free writing. Pennebaker had identified three aspects which, when present, would increase the efficacy of his expressive writing. These are: if a feeling was named and expressed; if there was an alteration of perspective, especially a movement away from using 'I' to using 'you' or 'she' or 'he' or 'they'; and if a narrative, a coherent story, begins to emerge.

Even in the writing of my 2004 novel, I had begun to use my skills as a creative writer to embark on this process. Hannah's (my) story of depression was told in the third person; I was giving Hannah's (my) experience a name; and I made an almost lucid narrative from something which, at the time, had felt like

pure madness. Now I wanted to offer the story to a readership, I knew crafting would be even more essential.

I am not the only author to have understood the therapy in sculpting a novel. When Jackie Kay (Scottish poet laureate) was asked how she got through her difficult encounter with her birth father (as described in her novel *Red Dust Road*, Picador, 2011) she replied:

By writing. ... By finding some way of crafting an experience, constructing a structure to create a door to let other people in so they can walk into your experience and call it theirs and in the business of doing this in itself gives you somewhere to go with it. It's almost like telling a story back to yourself. Often the more traumatised we are, the more we'll tell the story or else we'll be completely silent. Writing is one of the ways of expressing the inexpressible (Kay, 2016).

Tóibín explains his task in writing his recent novel *Nora Webster* (Penguin, 2015), of working out the truth of what had happened when his father died:

You're pulling this out of yourself. This is sometimes very difficult material. [But] it's an anchor, in a way, all this pleasure [I experience] would mean nothing if this pain, if this working out the pain wasn't there and I wasn't writing and I wasn't doing it (Tóibín, 2016b).

I was attempting to work through my own pain and find my own truth by fashioning a novel I thought others might want to read. And I was doing it in the crime genre. Which could seem an odd choice, if it were not for the crime writer, Val McDermid, suggesting it is the best for exploring current issues. She has described how she has, "Walked the fine line between making things up and staying real." And, for her, "The very act of imagining has been a powerful way of accessing the truth" (McDermid, 2016).

In the re-writing, the crafting, the working through, Hannah lost her twin. I didn't deliberately expel her, she just wasn't there anymore. Hannah remains a fragmented character, but the spectral disallowed side of her no longer has to be embodied by a twin which exists beyond Hannah's every-day consciousness. Hannah has become more integrated.

Noticing

"Integration" could be seen to be a therapeutic, a healing, intention (Erskine et al., 1999; DeYoung, 2003; Finlay, 2016). This can describe many processes, but the one I am leaning towards here, is the bringing together and acceptance of the

many sides of who we are. This could include exploring: past experiences which we would choose to ignore or forget; emotions or thoughts which have been long designated as undesirable; how we interact with others and how we fit within societal mores; the extent to which we can find meaning within our lives. The intention of this effort would be to:

facilitate a sense of wholeness in a person's being and functioning, at intrapsychic, mind-body, relational, societal and transpersonal levels. We strive to enable our clients to gain insight into their experience and to have a sense of feeling "at home" with self, at peace with others. There are of course limits to the extent to which any of us can be deemed "whole", but integration remains the driving spirit of our project – particularly with longer-term work (Finlay, 2016, p.120).

My copyeditor noted that in my novel I cycled between using herself and her self/selves. It made perfect sense to me. Our view of the "self" has depended on what era we live in and what part of the world. In the West, over the centuries, religion has given a sense of self and place of self in the world. I am not saying people did not despair or experience doubt, but Christianity had some ready (if, at times, unpalatable) answers. Changes in the perceptions around the human relationship with God (think the Enlightenment) and around the human membership of the animal kingdom (think Darwin) have affected our sense of self. This has been married with increased literacy plus increased opportunity (and time) to think and self-actualise.

We are able now to envisage a multi-dimensional self; a self housed in nature and the body; a self shaped by a multitude of interacting forces – genetic inheritance, society, history, language – and yet also itself a locus of freedom; a self which belongs to all that has shaped it, yet which bears also the reflexive power to think beyond the status quo, and to act ethically and imaginatively in ways that can be neither predicted nor described in advance (Abbs, 2006).

I came to realise, the disappearance of Clare was not only due to me choosing (unconsciously) to craft Hannah as a more integrated character. It was also a sign that I was moving towards a personal integration, what I experience as my many selves were fitting more comfortably together. Furthermore, the writer in me, the double which had previously been shy, and vague, was increasingly formed, increasingly integral to me. This was a process powered by the work of writing and crafting. By doing, I am becoming. And by reflecting back, noticing what is changing in my writing, I am learning more about myself.

It was not enough for me to write a novel, I also wanted to seek a readership. I decided to publish. It seems to me that there is

a merry dance between writer and reader, which, in the best of circumstances, is nourishing for both. As a reader, I know the pleasure and, sometimes, the very profound effect, of having found a story or a poem which touches me and pushes me to think or grasp at a new perspective. As a writer, the connection with the reader could be seen as the final act in a very long and laborious play. Tóibín says that the completion of his novel *Nora Webster*, which took ten years, allowed him to, at last, find some kind of closure on the death of his father:

One Saturday in September 2013 I finished the book. I knew that while I had perhaps opened up this world for readers, I had closed it for myself. I would, I imagined, not come back to it again (Tóibín, 2016b).

The reader plays a role of witness. Having our story, our experiences, our selves witnessed can in itself be transformative (Finlay, 2016, p.37). Psychologist, John Bowlby, stated that in order for us to grow into well-adjusted adults, we need to have a secure base set down in childhood. This is achieved through a loving care-giver effectively communicating to the child that their emotions are acknowledged and understood and it is safe to feel what they are feeling (Bowlby, 1988). Any deficit in the secure base can be replenished (though often with difficulty) by later empathic relationships. Publishing is a poor substitute for a loving early care-giver's acceptance. It is not the business of publishers, literary agents and readers to shore-up a crumbling secure base. However, I recognise it is, at least partly, what I am seeking from publication. And I do not believe I am the only writer to do so.

I have noticed within me the tension between wanting to be seen and wanting to hide. Pride competes with shame at each publication date. I want the recognition and yet I fear it. "Exposure now means exposure of one's inherent defectiveness as a human being. To be seen is to be seen as irreparably and unspeakably bad" (Kaufman, 1992, p.75).

After the novel launch, I feel sapped, worn-down, demotivated. As Alan Garner describes it:

I had to be totally incapacitated in order to build the energy, to fill the reservoir, that would be needed. The analogy with an enforced hibernation fitted. If I could live with this self-loathing, and see it as a signal to let the waters rise, it could remain a necessary, though unpleasant, part of a positive and creative process. As long as that thought stayed, I could endure (Garner, 1997, p. 212).

Like Garner, I walk a lot, out in the rugged landscape of North Yorkshire, feeling the arctic blast into my face. Unlike Garner, I am still writing, though I am back to free writing, ploughing up what's lurking underneath the now of the mind. And the cycle begins again.

Some Concluding Reflections

It is unlikely that everyone reading this article is or will become a novelist. However, I hope that this article may encourage some to take another look at the possibilities of developing a creative writing habit. Creative writing – writing which uses emotion; all the senses; metaphor; switches in perspective; and the rhythm and sound of language – can become a part of a process for self-understanding and exploring professional practice. It is a way of coming at something from a different angle which almost inevitably gives a new perspective and has the potential for naming something which has not so far been named. Write creatively, then using the reflexive loop suggested earlier, write again with a compassionate, noticing stance. It is often remarkable what surfaces.

I did not set out to do a piece of research. I set out to write a novel. I then set out to reflect on that writing for my own elucidation. When I thought of writing this article Richardson's work gave me a frame. It also encouraged me to innovate.

One way I have attempted to be innovative is by including two short fictionalised paragraphs which hark back to the 'golden age' of crime writing (Worsley, 2013). Partly this is me being playful and experimental in order to entice the reader. However, there is also a growing field of 'Arts Based Research' which suggests fiction as legitimate as both method and explication. Dr Patricia Leavy, author of *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* has said:

Research shows that reading fiction engages our entire brain, including some unexpected areas, such as those involved with movement and touch. We literally place ourselves in the stories we read, becoming immersed. There are activations in our brains for days after reading a novel, which is not the case with nonfiction prose (Leavy, 2019).

In another interview with www.creativitypost.com, she goes onto say, arts-based research has "the potential to create empathy, foster critical consciousness, promote new learning, and stimulate personal or social awareness" (Leavy, 2017). Perhaps my very brief flirtations with fiction in this article will have some of these effects. It is for the reader to decide.

In order for writing to really be a process of discovery, the writer has to free themselves to explore, to delve and then, eventually, to reflect on their creative process. This is not always easy, especially within the academic environment (Evans, 2013). However, as I hope I have demonstrated with this piece, the domain of creative writing is a rich seam to

plunder on our road to investigating ourselves and in our efforts to facilitate others in doing so.

The Strange Case of the Disappearing Twin

The assembly, which had formed the perfect tableau of a country house party set in the 1920s, is becoming restless. They had gathered together for a resolution. The detectives have failed to give them one. There is a disconsolate voice calling for chilled champagne. Another suggesting the phonograph be cranked up to play some dance music. Yet another proposes a game of cribbage. The gale can be heard howling outside. Its lament grows stronger, the door of the room crashes open, and a woman enters, apparently delivered on the tip of the storm's tongue.

It is Harriet Vane². She is wearing a cloche hat the colour of a good port wine. Her dark eyes under its rim reflect the embers of the fire. She has on a tweed coat threaded with scarlet and gold, her legs are clad in peacock-blue stockings, her feet shod in sturdy brown brogues. Her shoes show evidence of the walk she has taken along the muddy drive. "I tried to phone," she says crossly. Though, of course, the telephone lines were the first victim of the inclement weather, rendering the isolated estate more cut-off.

Wimsey rushes forward saying Harriet must change into dry clothes, have something to eat, be given a warming drink. She waves him away, accepting only a glass of whisky which she takes down in one gulp. She moderates her tone (it doesn't do to alienate your audience at the moment of denouement):

"I can solve the mystery of the disappearing twin."

"Can you Miss?" mocks the wag supposedly from high society in London, whose accent is as appropriated as his dinner suit.

"How can you, when these renowned detectives can't?" asks the dowager. The jewelry flashing on her clawed fingers and sagging neck is glass and paste, bought secretly to replace the family heirlooms long gone to the auction.

"I can," says Harriet firmly. "Because I am a writer."

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About the Author

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