

○ WRITING HISTORIES

IMAGINATION AND NARRATION

EDITED BY **ANN CURTHOYS** AND **ANN MCGRATH**

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© Mandy Martin and Tom Griffiths. Detail from *Flood below the Shearing Shed*. 16 February. 1999. Oil, ochre, pigment on linen. 90x330 cms. The painting is from the environmental project: Watersheds; the Paroo to the Warrego 1999.
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A note about pagination and chapter identification

Page numbers in this book do not run consecutively across chapters. Instead, page numbering restarts on the first page of each chapter and is prefaced by the chapter number. Thus 01.1 is chapter 1, page 1; 01.2 is chapter 1, page 2; 02.1 is chapter 2, page 1; 02.2 is chapter 2, page 2; and so on.

In the Table of Contents, each chapter is listed with its chapter number (01, 02, 03, etc.) only.

This system, in which page numbering is self-contained within each chapter, allows the publisher, Monash University ePress, to publish individual chapters online.

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Others we wish to thank include Kate McCarthy for research and editorial assistance, John Docker for assistance in developing some of the 'Writing History' courses upon which this one was based, and Anne-Maree O'Brien for administrative support at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research. For their contributions to the Visiting Scholars Program, we warmly thank the following: Robyne Bancroft, Roger Benjamin, Iain McCalman, the late Dymphna Clark, Claire Haywood, Marian Quartly, Paul Tapsell, Burgmann College, ANU, Environment ACT, and Nancy Sever, Director of the Drill Hall Gallery at the ANU. We thank Mandy Martin for permission to reproduce a detail from one of her paintings for the cover of this book.

We also wish to thank Bain Attwood, Marie Pernat, Jo Bramble, James Cannon, Sarah Cannon, Kathy Lothian and Joanne Mullins for the work they did to ensure the publication of the new edition of this book.

○ PREFACE TO THE ELECTRONIC EDITION

We are delighted that Monash University ePress is republishing *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* as a print and an e-book. Electronic publication will enable it to reach a larger audience. We are grateful to Monash Publications in History for publishing the book in the first place. Since that time, it has reached a diverse audience. This is so, we think, because there are few books quite like this one. There are many guides to writing history essays and theses, and to writing particular kinds of history—family, local, church, and company history, to mention those most likely to attract writing guides—but there are few that aim to assist in the writing of general and academic histories. We hope this republication assists a new generation of budding historians to participate in the adventure of mind and imagination that is the writing of history.

We have updated the reading guide and bibliography to include material published since the book's first edition. In Australia and internationally, the discipline has undergone many significant changes since 2000, including the 'history wars', the debates around history and fiction prompted by Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, and the moves towards transnational history. The reading guide now includes some of the main texts from these developments. It also has several books that have appeared since their authors reflected in this volume on the writing challenges they presented.

Finally, we note with great sadness the passing of one of our contributors, Greg Denning, in 2008. Greg had a long and distinguished career as an historian of international reputation, but we knew him mainly towards the end of his career, when he conducted many workshops for PhD students at the Australian National University and elsewhere. He inspired his students, and indeed his peers, to have faith in their projects, believe in the value of history generally, realise that historical writing is always a performance, and aim high in their writing. We dedicate this electronic edition of *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* to him.

Ann Curthoys
Sydney, February 2009

Ann McGrath
Canberra, February 2009

○ GALLERY, MUSEUM AND OTHER EXERCISES FOR WRITING HISTORY

Ann Curthoys
Ann McGrath

We used these writing exercises in our Visiting Scholars Program, and student response was very favourable. Try them in your writing class or informal writing group, or try them alone.

EXERCISE ONE: 'TWO WORDS'

When a group is first established, and first meets to discuss writing, arrange for everyone to introduce themselves, not only with some personal details and a statement of their subject or topic, but also by saying what their project is really about in two words. Just two words to suggest their major aim or purpose. Many people find this extraordinarily challenging, and thought-provoking.

A variant is to ask them to state the argument or theme of their project in one sentence.

EXERCISE TWO: KEEPING A DAILY JOURNAL

The daily journal is a great way to become more conscious of where you are going in the learning process. It serves as a sounding board for evolving ideas, and also as a means of mapping your achievement in developing a more sophisticated understanding of your research topic.

Write a daily journal entry that especially considers your writing project and ideas you encounter in primary research, secondary reading or seminar paper attendance which might have some bearing on your writing project. Feel free to write or illustrate (photos? doodles?) whatever else you like in it. This journal could then be used as a primary source for a reflective consideration of the research process.

We asked students to select an excerpt from their journal to read out to the class. Several chose to do a little editing for effect. The other students really enjoyed hearing the excerpts. The presentation stage should take place towards the end of the course or program—that is, once students have already gained a sense of trust, and a sense of having shared an intellectual journey.

EXERCISE THREE: WRITING OUT OF ART

Approximately 1000 words

This exercise aims to spark the imagination, especially of the visual and the metaphorical. For history writers, we see it as a 'warm up' exercise. You are encouraged to explore connections between visual creativity—the artist's practice/techniques of creating an image—and of the practice of creating academic writing. Technique (including the carefully learnt and the spontaneous) and audience response are important considerations.

The writer or teacher chooses an appropriate art exhibition which would be of interest. This exercise is designed as a class activity, but it can also be done by the individual writer, who might like to share the process with a writer colleague, or else to do this as an individual exercise. For our Writing Histories/Writing Cultures program, we took the students to an exhibition of Emily Kngwarreye's paintings at the National Gallery of Australia. When we took them to the 'Seeing Cézanne' exhibition at the Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, we asked Roger Benjamin, an art historian, to do a floor talk. Many galleries have educational officers and volunteers who will provide some introduction to an exhibition, but this is not essential.

We then asked students to write about 1000 words on either:

(a) Consider particular examples of art, or your overall visit to the Gallery, as a starting point. Write a reflexive, reflective piece about your training and experience as an academic writer, and muse about the borderlines between art and writing—craft, practice and effect upon audiences.

or

(b) Using one piece of art in particular, write an imaginative, richly descriptive piece based on your understandings of an aspect of an historical, possibly cross-cultural, experience or event/s. (You might consider writing dialogue and/or the first person, but at least experiment with some stylistic device you normally wouldn't use.)

We urged students to stretch their imaginations, to adopt an entirely new speaking voice and writing style. One of the gratifying aspects of this exercise was to see the students with flatter writing styles making long-distance creative leaps. Sometimes this led to a kind of identity crisis—'Was that me writing that?' All students circulated their work and the pieces were discussed one by one in the larger group. Discussion was lively and

there was plenty of diversity in audience reactions to writing experimentation. While a consensus usually emerged about what 'had worked' and what hadn't, audience members will differ in taste and sensibility. Don't expect a homogenous audience!

EXERCISE FOUR

Approximately 1000 words

This is really a variant of Exercise Three but this time the focus is an object or objects in a museum.

Visit a specific museum exhibition—definitely not the whole museum—and write an imaginative narrative piece focussing upon an object or objects within the display. Experimentation with dialogue and rich scene-setting is encouraged.

You can do the same thing, with variations, with a play, film, or music.

EXERCISE FIVE

Approximately 3000 words, illustrated

This is a longer, more complex exercise, appropriate once a history-writing group is well established.

Select a building of heritage significance. Document it by observation and visual recording via photos, drawings, diagrams, maps. Using at least one primary source and historical background information, see if you can write a piece which brings the history of the building to life. Pay careful attention to the integration of visual and textual sections. (The responsible Heritage, Historic Houses or other organisation should have some background information to start off your research.)

EXERCISE SIX

Approximately 4000 words

Select a landscape or streetscape. This may be one you know well from personal experience or one which is a new area of inquiry. Describe what it looks like as richly as possible, then tell its story imaginatively. Pay careful attention to relations between people and

the physical, tangible environment and draw diagrams and use photographs or other illustration where appropriate.

EXERCISE SEVEN

Approximately 5000 words

What is the topic of your main research project? Write a reflexive or reflective piece explaining how you came to choose it, or how it chose you. Now concentrate on describing the events of your research journey in as much detail as possible. Make sure it is a readable tale with strong introductory lead in, meaty discussion, and a clever ending.

○ CONTRIBUTORS

At the time this book was first published all the contributors were based at The Australian National University. Now, their respective affiliations are:

Ann Curthoys, Department of History, University of Sydney

John Docker, Department of History, University of Sydney, and Research School of Humanities, The Australian National University

Bill Gammage, Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University

Tom Griffiths, History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University

Kate McCarthy, School of Law, University of Exeter

Ann McGrath, History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University

Donna Merwick, Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University

Peter Read, Department of History, University of Sydney

Deborah Bird Rose, Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie University

At the time of his death in 2008, Greg Dening was Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Melbourne and Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University.