

From the Kitchen

3 March 2010



No-one tells the truth and that's the truth. Whatever we aver to be so is at best an interpretation, filtered through our own limited experience and understanding. I'm not confusing the truth with facts, although the boundary between the two may be blurred.

If two cars are stationary at an intersection, both with crumpled bodies, that is a fact. People looking at this would be unlikely to disagree about it. Discovering a coherent truth about how the two cars came to be there in that way is nigh on impossible. It depends on observations and memories and both of these are subjective and subject to errors, even deliberate falsification.

Some years ago I won a writing competition for my story '[Dead](#)'. The judging was done without the judge knowing the writers' names or any other information about them. The story is a first-person account by a young, abused woman in a mental hospital, suffering hallucinations. The judge was moved by the story; it 'rang true'. Was it the truth? The answer to that is in the mind of the reader – each reader. I am not a woman, have not been abused in that way and have never been a resident in a mental hospital.

How dare I then write the story as if I had actually had those experiences? I've been asked that a number of times. I wonder if writers of detective stories are asked how they dare, as few have ever been detectives or criminals and many creators of male detectives are women. How truthful can a story of a little girl be, written by a forty-year-old woman? Should a female writer ever have the temerity to write a male character? Can a 'black' person write a 'white' character, or an Australian tell an authentic story from the perspective of a Chinese person or an African?

The truth in any story is in what it conjures for the reader – thoughts, images, memories, ideas.

What is a reader prepared to believe? An account in a newspaper may, by default, be assumed to be truthful (depending on the reader's level of cynicism). If the account is hard to believe, that it is in a newspaper helps the reader to accept it. If exactly the same account appeared in a work of 'fiction', the reader would be more likely to assume it to be a fabrication. 'Truth', after all, is allowed to be stranger than fiction.

It is easy to confuse information and truth. Information may be part of the truth and is fed to us by businesses, governments, work colleagues, friends, children ... "Why is there a broken glass on the floor?" "The glass fell." Truthful; but is it the truth? The truth may be closer to: "I couldn't reach the plate of biscuits on the table. I climbed on a chair. I leaned over and pulled the plate towards me. The glass fell." Or, more simply: "I knocked the glass over when I tried to get a biscuit." Same result, different accountability, different truths.

In biographical books and films, some 'real' characters are often rolled into one, for ease of storytelling or to make a point about the central character's truth. Simplicity may be more powerful than the whole truth. Does this lie take away from the 'truth'?

When writing 'Dead', I didn't sit down and imagine what my character's experiences would have been. It was as if I was listening to her and writing it down. The only part of the story I 'manufactured' or made up, was the ending. She didn't tell me how it should end, because she didn't know. The ending had to be believable, so I made it up.

More recently, my story '[A Different Slant](#)' was commended in another competition. It is a first-person account of a man who is not able to stand up straight and who shakes uncontrollably. He describes what this is like and how he longs to be different. The only thing I have in common with this character is gender.

Writing a character may require the writer to be in the skin of that person (or take dictation from them). But what allows us to authentically be like someone else? Humans are able to empathise, to imagine how it would be to be like someone else. This must call on qualities we have in common, even a shared consciousness. Research has shown that our brains cannot tell the difference between something experienced and the same thing imagined. The brainwave patterns are the same, as are the physiological and emotional manifestations. This is probably what makes role-playing in electronic games possible and exciting and what makes pornography popular. And ain't that the truth?