

***Distance* (creative component)**

Writing within history: the challenge of representing significant cultural moments in fiction (exegesis)

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Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

The creative component of my MCA thesis is a novel set during the lead-up to Australia's 1996 federal election. It tells the story of Abi Platter, a seventeen-year-old living in Sydney, who is beginning to outgrow the family she once loved unconditionally. Halfway through her final year of school, Abi becomes friends with Lucinda Whitford, the eccentric daughter of a wealthy barrister.

Initially Abi is besotted with the Whitfords, and their cultured, opulent lifestyle. She longs to follow the talented Whitford children on their path to successful and important lives. Then she unexpectedly falls in love with Adina, the girlfriend of Luce's older brother, Jonathan, and everything she thought she knew about society and her place within it shifts irrevocably.

Embedded in the personal story of the novel are power plays that mirror the dynamics on the 1995–1996 Australian stage. Just as the Liberals were able to gain the support of middle Australia only to betray it, so the Platters become casualties in the Whitfords' pursuit to protect their own status. Just as Howard harnessed fear and prejudice within society to win the election, so too does Jonathan Whitford use Abi's sexuality to silence her.

By paralleling a personal story with the events happening on the broader political landscape in Australia in the mid 1990s, my novel explores the values, hopes and fears of a nation at a pivotal moment in its history, as well as its schisms — between 'middle Australia', the Liberal Party's traditional affluent voting base, and the educated social progressives that Keating spoke to. It examines the machinations of power: majorities over minorities, rich over poor, men over women.

In the accompanying exegesis, I outline a brief history of the politics that characterised the 1996 election and its consequences and describe how my novel engages with the political themes of the era. I position my novel within existing literature and explain the original contribution it makes to the field. I describe my methodology and consider the value of exploring historical events through fiction. I contemplate the strengths of fiction in representing such events, as well as its potential limitations. I then discuss the challenges of dramatising an abstract moment in history, the ethics of the political novel, the problem of polemic, and finally the ways that fiction's unique properties can be used to explore the process of history making itself.