

an allergy

and

Novelists of the Past, Historians of the Present

by

Sunil Badami

Submitted in 2013 to the University of Technology, Sydney in fulfilment of
the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts

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 except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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.

Signature of Student:

Date: 15 August 2013

Abstract.....	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Foreword.....	vii
Synopsis of <i>an allergy</i>	viii
Creative Extract: Local History and Case Histories	10
Prologue.....	12
Case History No. 1: Post-Embolism Foreign Accent Syndrome.....	15
1.	18
Case History No. 2: Papillomatic Epidermodysplasia Verruciformis	25
2.	32
Case History No. 3: Hyperotic Tergo-Collitic Cochleitis	40
3.	44
Case History No. 4: Quasi-Ischiopagic Conjoined Identical Twin Corsican Syndromatic Limerence	53
4.	56
Case History No. 5: Somno-subluceate Puteulanic Morphitis	64
5.	69
Case History No. 6: Molluscular Dermatitis	78
6.	82
Case History No. 7: Acute Beta-carotene Toxicosis	94
7.	99
Case History No. 8: Proteus Syndrome Metatropic Dysplastic Dystrophic Gigantism.....	110
8.	116
Case History No. 9: Severe Hypo-thyroidic Thrombocytopenic Urticarious Heat Exchange Disorder	124
9.	132
Case History No. 10: Congenital Familial Prosopagnosia	140
10.	145
Case History No. 11: Acute Conjunctive Retiniasis.....	157
11.	161
Case History 12: Pseudo-Hyperthymestic Anterograde Regressive Amnesia	175
12.	179
Epilogue.....	190

Exegesis: Novelists of the Past, Historians of the Present	203
Introduction	204
Questions, Questions, Questions...	205
Approaches	209
History versus Fiction.....	211
Texts and Secrets	219
Ritual Transactions and Contractual Obligations	236
Audiences and Defences	239
False Document	243
The Great Australian Literary Hoax	247
Fake Memoirs and Assumed Names	250
Creative Freedom and Imaginative Empathy	253
Fiction, Faction and Truth	257
Authentic Rhetoric and Inauthentic Identities	260
Frontier Skirmishes.....	263
Fictive History and True History (of the Kelly Gang)	266
His Life as a Fake	269
Novels: The New TV?	271
Economies of Onymities	279
Good Artists, Bad Artists, Dead Authors	284
History as the Novel, the Novel as History	287
Literary Originals	293
From the Books Pages to the Front Page.....	296
Conclusion	300
Postscript: Truth and Fiction, Life and Art.....	308
Appendix I: <i>History</i>	310
Bibliography and References	324

Abstract

This thesis is comprised of a creative extract: *Local History and Case Histories* and an exegesis: *Novelists of the Past, Historians of the Present*. The creative extract is part of a much longer project, called *an allergy*, a multi-generic self-reflexive historiographical metafictional novel which explores ideas of history and fiction, memory and imagination, truth and identity across a number of genres, narratives, periods and voices.

That history and fiction share many similarities is an idea well-established by both historians, critics and novelists, from Lionel Gossman and Hayden White to Richard Jenkins and E. L. Doctorow. The fiction–history debate has also stood at the heart of Australian literary history and Australian history itself, coming to a head during the ‘history’– and ‘culture wars’ declared by then-Prime Minister John Howard shortly after his election in 1996.

These wars coincided with the so-called ‘memoir boom’ in which personal autobiographical narratives and first-person, present-tense fiction rose in popularity among a reading public hungry for ‘authentic’ stories, often by once-marginalised voices. Yet despite historian Mark McKenna calling for a dialogue between historians and novelists, the discussion seemed as vehement and vituperative as those surrounding the history– and culture wars.

The creative extract offers my own parody of the memoir popular during the 1990s, and explores issues of race, authenticity, history, truth and identity, issues that were raised in cases like the controversy over Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, reaching back to the Koolmatrie and Demidenko affairs. I use these controversies as a springboard to examine in the exegesis that follows questions regarding issues fiction and fictional truth, imaginative empathy and creative freedom, appropriation and attribution, national and individual identity, especially in the context of Australia’s long and ignoble history of literary hoaxing.

The exegesis examines the textual defences and broader contextual and moral criticisms in both controversies, analysing the rhetorical devices and narrative conventions common to fiction and history; it relates these problems and possibilities for negotiating them creatively and ethically to *an allergy*.

The conceptual rationale for this thesis is embedded in the work in every possible way. My overall argument is not so much that history and fiction, truth and reality, memory and unreliability are now blurred — for this is an argument that has been made numerous times before — but that the act of retrieving truth, identity, authenticity or memory constitutes a re-imagining of the very elements it seeks to interrogate creatively and critically.

The reader is ultimately positioned as an active creator of the text. The exegesis is followed by a short Appendix which contains a sample of a different section of *an allergy* by way of demonstrating this; while this section it is not offered for examination it showcases my deliberate merging of the boundaries of the scholarly and the creative.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Debra Adelaide her friendship, counsel, incredible dedication – and patience. Thanks to Katrina Schlunke, Paul Dawson, Bill Ashcroft, Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas for their generosity and wisdom. Thanks too to Jane Kemensky for not only generously sharing her article, ‘Novelties: A Historian’s Field Notes from Fiction’ (2011) with me, but exhorting me to share it with others.

There are many wonderful writers and teachers whose work has inspired not only mine but whose example has inspired me. They are too many to acknowledge here, but I must make special mention of Robert Gray, whose poem *Diptych* sowed the seeds of this life’s work, and Geordie Williamson, who suggested the title *an allergy*.

Special thanks to Sushila Badami, a wonderful mother, good doctor and great storyteller, who has provided me with inspiration and support — both material and moral — for as long as I can remember.

But the greatest thanks of all goes most of all to my beloved muses three: April, Leela and Maya, without whom this — or anything — would have ever been possible, or even imaginable.

Foreword

The following creative extract, *Local History* (and *Case Histories*), is part of a much larger work, *an allergy*, comprising four discrete but interconnected narratives, voices and genres punctuated by short, related episodes.

Given *an allergy*'s length, it was deemed that to offer a sample of each narrative, the reading experience would be too disjointed and unrepresentative of *an allergy*'s overall structure, which interlaces these narratives in three repeated sequences:

- *Local History* (memoir) and *Case Histories* (recounted medical history)
 1. *History* (popular and academic history)
- *Local History* and *Case Histories*
 2. *Her Story* (epistolary novel and primary sources)
- *Local History* and *Case Histories*
 3. *His Story* (contemporaneous historical literary fiction)
- *Local History* and *Case Histories* (repeated over three sequences)

History and *His Story* (an evocation of contemporaneous 1930s fiction) are both over 90,000 words in length and *Her Story* (based on false documentary 'primary' mixed-media evidence and epistolary fiction) is as yet unfinished. *Case Histories* and *History* therefore (comprising fictional memoir and 12 connected short medical case histories), at a length of 70,000 words, was deemed an apt inclusion, especially given the discussion in the accompanying exegesis of the rise of 'narcissistic narratives' (Hutcheon 1984) and memoir, fake and otherwise.

However, given that the exegesis discusses a number of the genres and narrative techniques deployed in *an allergy* with specific reference to *History*, the narrative strand based upon popular or academic history, I have included a short extract in an appendix, to illustrate the points made.

In the exegetic interests of displaying the research and drafting processes involved in parodying historical discourse, my comments, deletions and outstanding research queries have been included for the reader's reference, as well as footnotes, endnotes and quotes. As this is an appendix, it is not submitted for assessment but it is hoped will illustrate in a practical and concrete way that the results of the exegesis's research have been implemented in *an allergy*, particularly *History*. The synopsis below is also for reference only, to offer an idea of *an allergy* in its entirety, while

acknowledging the fragmentary, lacunary nature of the text, and, perhaps, of history itself.

Synopsis of *an allergy*

Written as a picaresque saga spread across four discrete yet interconnected narratives, voices and genres across distant countries and in divergent periods as memoir, popular history, historical fiction, medical report and epistolary novel, *an allergy* explores the uncertainties of identity, the fictions of history and the pleasures and regrets of desire. It asks, among other things: are we who we are because of what we believe we know, or what we think we want?

***Case Histories* (medical case histories, recounted by a doctor)**

In a small country town, a doctor gathers his children on the verandah after dinner and tells them stories of his long and distinguished career: of the woman who starts speaking in foreign accents, despite never leaving the District; of the Siamese twins who fall in love with the same girl; of the man whose love of carrots turns him another colour; the face-blind family who don't recognise each other; and the man who becomes allergic to the love of his life.

***Local History* (a memoir of childhood by an adult narrator)**

That summer, as their elder brother grows more distant, as their parents' marriage falls apart and as a panther stalks the hills outside town, a child learns a lot about love. And finds out more than they want to know.

***History* (a popular historical text, with real and fictional sources, quotes and characters)**

On a Sydney tram, a part-time showgirl and full-time good-time girl gives birth. In a picaresque saga spanning the slums of the Rocks to the mansions of Bellevue Hill,

the casinos of Kings Cross and beyond the Black Stump, Martha and her son Argyle make and lose fortunes on stage and in clubs, in two-up joints and sly-grog dens, at a strange, singular time when Sydney's streets ran with blood and booze. And it's the story of a man, so used to getting anything he desires, suddenly unable to have the one thing he wants most.

His Story (an historical novel)

A strange half-caste foundling, swaddled in an army blanket and caul, is left at the gates of an Indian orphanage. In a sleepy cantonment in the dying days of the Raj, a young British-Indian woman struggles against the claustrophobic confines of club life and her own illicit desires with violent results. Running away to find his mother, shedding names and making up stories as he journeys through Bombay bazaars, travelling circuses and a perilous journey by sea, this boy learns much more than he could have ever imagined. And, torn from the things she loves most, Elizabeth Braithwaite discovers far more than she could have ever hoped for.

Her Story (an epistolary novel, with a combination of media extracts, diary entries and letters)

'Aurora by name, she was a roarer by nature.' And when her papers — diaries, postcards, newspaper clippings, letters and more — are discovered, revealing a past unknown to her children, do these fragments of a life, the unreliable evidence of a secret history, answer any questions, or provoke more?