

**Love texts: The Lacanian gaze in epistolary literature
in the 21st century**

By

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**Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

March 2014

University of Technology Sydney

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.

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Acknowledgements

Many people have supported me in the completion of this thesis. Thanks go to my supervisor John Dale for patient and generous guidance. To my UTS support crew - Helen Vatsikopolous, Sonya Voumard and Amy Simpson-Deeks. To my dear friends Alexia Maddox, Linda McSweeny, Tanya Mitchell and Juliet Willetts, and my sisters Siobhan O'Dwyer and Shannon O'Dwyer, for brainstorming, debriefing, draft reading and technical support. To Alan Gold for writing mentorship; Rhonda Nohra for providing a Sydney bolt-holt; and Juliet Richardson for careful proofreading. To my parents Robyn-Ann and Tim O'Dwyer for gifting their time in the final months of editing; and to my mother and my uncle, John Gericke, for allowing such generous access to my grandfather's personal letters. It has been an honour to get to know my grandfather better, and to connect him to his great grandsons through the power of the word.

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Abstract

The purloined letter has become a symbol of seduction, confession and betrayal.

This thesis explores the origins of the epistolary novel, its enduring influence and its place in contemporary literature. It asks: If letters do not exist, will epistolary novels exist? And how long will contemporary authors continue to find inspiration from an old-fashioned form?

Three case studies are considered: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) and Damon Galgut's *In A Strange Room* (2010). Each novel draws on the epistolary tradition, exploring universal themes of absence, exile, loneliness and grief through the eyes of the bereaved lover *who writes*.

The seductive power of epistolary literature can be situated within Jacques Lacan's gaze theory. The gaze sets up an inherent secret, revealing the truth only in the final dénouement. It anticipates the voyeuristic reader, compelling him or her to watch.

A creative work accompanies this thesis. *In My Grandfather's House* draws on all the usual epistolary themes: love, exile, trial and self-identity. The primary source is a bundle of love letters written from my grandfather to my grandmother, in 1941. These are contained within the structure of three letters – one to my grandfather, one to a former lover and one to my young sons. A reflective chapter considers the gaze in my own work, and the circumstances in which 'found' letters should be read and published.