

# *Dangerous Devotions*

A Novel/Thesis by

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Submitted for the degree of  
MA(Writing)

**University of Technology, Sydney, 2005**

## **Certificate of Authorship/Originality**

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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Ann Penhallurick, 2005

## **Table of Contents:**

Abstract:	i-ii
Supporting Statement/Exegesis	iii-xv
Reference list (to exegesis)	xvi-xvii
<i>Dangerous Devotions</i> (a novel)	1-199

## **Acknowledgements :**

I would like particularly to acknowledge the wisdom of Glenda Adams, the organisational strengths of Rose Moxham, the editorial and motivational skills of Cathy Cole - all current or erstwhile staff of the University of Technology, Sydney. They, and other UTS writing area staff, have made an invaluable contribution to the skills and knowledge gained during the process of writing the novel/thesis and supporting statement contained here.

I would also like to acknowledge the incomparable support of my partner, Andrew, and my three children, Josephine, Nicholas and Toby. No studying parent could have a more wonderful family than mine.

Ann Penhallurick, January, 2005

## **Abstract:** *Dangerous Devotions*

*Dangerous Devotions* is a novel of approximately 75,000 words, in the genre of crime fiction. The plot of *Dangerous Devotions* follows the investigation, by barrister Paul Challinor, into an exclusive and very secretive escort agency in Sydney. This agency, which doesn't advertise in the usual ways, has as its workers, women and some men who are in wheelchairs, have amputations or other physical and sensory impairments. The agency services a niche market of people who call themselves 'devotees'.

Prior to commencement of the story a woman working for the escort agency has been nearly killed, and a refuge for women with disability has begun receiving vicious parcels of mutilated dolls. Early in the book, Paul (who is blind) meets, apparently by chance, Julia Prettie, a woman he finds immediately attractive. The potential romance and the obstacles to it form a sub-plot within the story. The story is told from multiple points of view, including those of Sonya and Avril, both agency workers and both women with physical disability. Avril loves her job and the potential for freedom it gives her, while Sonya finds much in it to shame her. In the course of the novel one of the girls is kidnapped. Julia's sister, Jean, also disappears – unbeknownst to Julia at the time - and the plot follows Paul and Julia's attempts to find Avril, as well as the resolution of Jean's disappearance.

Behind the writing of *Dangerous Devotions* is a theoretical exploration of identity and representation: of people with disability in fiction, but also of people in general. Following the work of Paul Eakin, published in the journal, *Narrative*, the concept of the self as a momentary, ever-reconstructing outcome of the individual's neurobiological process is put forward. Identity, conceptualised as a neurobiological process, reduces the reliance on external and social constructions as the determiners of a person. Identity, constantly reforming in the neurones of each individual also challenges the notions of an often static, passive embodiment that informs much disability theory.

While *Dangerous Devotions* has the conventions of the crime genre, it deploys these conventions with subject-matter and characters usually relegated to more formal, 'factual' discourses (medical, sociological, care-giving discourses), and in doing so attempts to both entertain and to, less overtly, usurp and overturn more traditional narrative positions of people with disability as passive, minor characters, 'other' to the main game. *Dangerous Devotions* situates people with disability as the heroes of the story.

**EXEGESIS/ SUPPORTING STATEMENT for**

***Dangerous Devotions***

**a novel submitted by Ann Penhallurick,**

**for the award MA(Writing)**

**University of Technology, Sydney, January, 2005**

*If your words are not pleasing, hold in half of them.*

(Chinese Proverb)<sup>1</sup>

To study creative writing is to acknowledge that writing is a craft, a set of skills that can be acquired, or at least honed. It is to throw aside the notion that creative writing is a gift, vested upon one by an outside force, flowing through the brain, the body, to the pen, (an impression I associate with childhood memories of William Wordsworth and clouds of daffodils). Writing must be acknowledged as like the human being her/himself, complex, a mix of fundamental traces and

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<sup>1</sup> David Crystal, Hilary Crystal, *Words on Words: Quotations about Language and Languages*, Penquin Books, 2000, p162

environmental nurture – with, in a creative writing course, the emphasis on the gritty, hard-work aspects of the latter.

I was accepted into the MA Writing (by thesis) with a proposal to write an extended narrative non-fiction work. This project centred on a group of people I had known for some years, in my guise as psychologist, disabilities consultant, and communication expert. Each member of this group lives with having intellectual disability and/or mental illness. Particular writing skills would be needed if I were to render their voices, their gestures and other non-verbal communications effectively. At the very least, I would need to be able to identify and analyse the conventions of non-fiction writing well enough that I would not simply produce a piece of ‘disability discourse’, with my subjects as innocent victims of a system they must continually struggle against.

In the first year of my M.A. enrolment, however, most of this group again became clients of my professional practice, due to a major upheaval in their lives. I was presented with an ethical dilemma. Trained as a psychologist, I knew that no matter how well I tried to avoid it, my ‘bias’, my own need to hear what I wanted to hear, or glean what I wanted to write, was likely to affect my interactions with each of these individuals. Instead of an effective psychologist I might well be – as a woman I know with mental illness once so aptly put it – no more than a ‘stealer of stories’.

I applied to change my thesis proposal to a work of fiction, a novel. After various moves, which could be characterised as a drift through classical (third person, historical narrative), a flirtation with jazz (multiple point of view, fragmented melodies), I am submitting for the MA a piece of rock and roll – a crime fiction novel, *Dangerous Devotions*. Yet, oddly enough, this novel is something of the same book I



might have written as a non-fiction author. My heroes are people with disability, their setting is the ordinary and ex-ordinary difficulties faced by ordinary people. They rise out of the chaos. All these narrative elements are the same.

The challenge, though, of shifting from non-fiction which (might) enable identifiable people - whose documented histories and real images could inform and validate the text - to speak for themselves, to a novel dramatising the lives of people with disability, has been considerable.

Non-fiction, I would argue, by definition, stakes and relies on an implicit set of claims: these people are real, these events are real, the author is no more than a filter for the 'real' – albeit one who organises, reorders, perhaps makes more dramatic by a certain level of skill, or art - but not artifice. By its definition, fiction declares itself a work – a whimsy, a fabrication - of the imagination. This is not to say that fiction has no actual or perceived relation to the real. In fact, reviewers and commentators spend considerable time delving into books and biographies to reveal who the 'real' person behind the fictional creation might be; now and then slander is claimed; authors sometimes admit to – or claim as centrally important – the actual experience they have fictionalised. Yet, to say that readers, and even authors themselves, impute a reality behind fiction is not to say that fiction automatically lays claim to truth or authenticity.

From my point of view, wanting to give centre-stage to individuals who are often silent and/or silenced, non-fiction had the advantage of almost seamlessly, and with apparent validity, giving marginalised people 'a voice'. Fiction, on the other hand, carried with it the potential to be inadequate, partial – in both the sense of 'a

part' or 'prejudiced' - or simply wrong, in its relation to truth. In particular, my many years working in the 'disability sector' made me aware than any attempt at fictional representation of people with disabilities could easily be criticised as 'inauthentic' as I do not have a marked disability myself.

Of course, writing a piece of fiction in which characters with disability appear is not new. Shakespeare's 'fools' immediately spring to mind, as does the peculiar redemptive maiming of Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Martin Halliwell, in an excellent book released early in 2004, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film*,<sup>2</sup> identifies the long history of 'fools' and 'idiots' in fiction, referring to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868), Jacob Wasserman's *Caspar Hauser* (1908), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), films such as *Charly* (1968) – from the short story *Flowers for Algernon* - and 'Rain Man' (1988), to name just a few.

Recently, also, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* won the 2003 Whitbread Award for fiction. This short novel is told entirely through the mind and perceptions of Christopher, a child at a special school, with a gift for maths and extreme difficulty with empathy. Reviewing the book in the *New York Times* in June 2003, Michiko Kakutani asserted that: 'To get an idea of what Mark Haddon's moving new novel, "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," is like, think of "The Sound and the Fury" crossed with "The Catcher in the Rye" and one of Oliver Sacks's real-life stories'.<sup>3</sup>

Haddon's book is rare, in that the child with autism is the central, guiding consciousness of the book. It is much more common for the person with a disability to be an ancillary character (David Malouf's, Jenny in *The Great World*' (1990) for

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film*,

<sup>3</sup> Michiko Kakutani, *Books of The Times; Math and Physics? A Cinch. People? Incomprehensible*. New York Times, June 13, 2003, p41

example), and/or for the character to work in contrast with the ‘normal’ characters, thus producing and reinforcing what Halliwell refers to as the ‘deeply ingrained cultural convention of associating defects with a lack of virtue or suspect morality’<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, even in one of the few feature-film representations in which people with disability are not single, isolated characters, the remarkable 1932 MGM production *Freaks*, although people with dwarfism and ‘deformities’ are shown in solidarity and strength they, in the end, succumb to evil and depravity.

How did Haddon manage a sympathetic, believable and, in the world’s terms, ‘disabled’, consciousness? Perhaps, quite simply, because Haddon’s Christopher is not an adult. Children commonly connote innocence, although there is also the child as ‘bad seed’. Christopher’s innocence is extreme. So much so that he becomes obsessed with solving the mystery of who killed the dog in the nighttime. As a child, Christopher is allowed a quaintness of perception that, in an adult character, would not readily be acceptable. This is not to say that Christopher is a not a wonderful character. He is, and his spare, direct comments provide an unusual and revealing vision of the world, but as both as a child and as an ‘idiot savant’ this perception is readily read as his own and does not challenge conventions of representation of people with disabilities.

As Anthony Darke, in a PhD thesis published on the internet, points out, quoting Gilman (1988): “... 'it is in the world of representations that we banish our fear of [the Other ] ( and find) proof that *we* are still whole.. Although some social change has occurred - legal rights, economic advancement *et al* - the archetypal and

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<sup>4</sup> Halliwell, op cit, p17

stereotypical persist even though many have been forcefully challenged’<sup>5</sup> Haddon’s Christopher is both archetypal and stereotypical.

On the other hand, the novel presented with this dissertation, *Dangerous Devotions*, has little in it that is innocent. The title refers to devotees – the label adopted by people who are sexually attracted to people with amputations, blindness, and other disabilities. Devotees have internet websites which include everything from pleas for recognition, to erotic short stories and explicit pictures. Some devotees become wannabees – taking on often elaborate and intricate pretences of having an amputation or other disability, while some devotees/wannabees go to extreme lengths to have a literal amputation performed on themselves. There is debate about whether devotee-ism is a paraphilia under the categories of the Diagnostics and Statistics Manual (DSMIV) used by psychologists and psychiatrists.

The plot of *Dangerous Devotions* follows the investigation – by barrister Paul Challinor (who is blind) - into an exclusive and very secretive escort agency in Sydney. This agency, which doesn’t advertise in the usual ways, has, as its workers, women, and some men, who are in wheelchairs, have amputations or other physical and sensory impairments. Early in the book, Paul, apparently by chance, meets Julia Prettie, an attractive woman who, it turns out, has a sister with multiple disabilities, including intellectual disability. Prior to commencement of the story a woman working for the escort agency has been nearly killed, and a refuge for women with disability has begun receiving vicious parcels of mutilated dolls. The story is told from multiple points of view, including those of Sonya and Avril, both agency

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Anthony Darke, *The Cinematic Construction of Physical Disability as Identified Through the Application of the Social Model of Disability to Six Indicative Films Made since 1970*, Thesis submitted for PhD in Film Studies, The University of Warwick, 1999, publication copyright .. no page numbers available.

workers and both women with physical disability. Avril loves her job and the potential for freedom it gives her, while Sonya finds much to shame her. In the course of the novel one of the girls is kidnapped. Julia's sister, Jean, also disappears – unbeknownst to her at the time - and the plot follows Paul and Julia's attempts to find Avril, as well as the resolution of Jean's disappearance.

Disability and sexuality, and particularly disability as object or target of sexual fetish, offers considerable challenges to any writer. While filmmaker Peter Greenaway used the camera and thousands of megawatts of electricity to shine his luminescent but opaque light on the subject of the wounded-disabled and/or decomposing body in *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), I am a practitioner-writer for whom the power of the image (spoken, written or filmed) to 'provide insight' and perhaps even, as Tobin Siebers says, to make 'changes to the process of representation itself'<sup>6</sup> must be acknowledged.

When I began writing *Dangerous Devotions* the main character with disability was Jean, and the disability which most impacted on her life was intellectual disability. This posed specific problems in representing internal thought but did not involve the potential disruption of the body-as-other in the text. I felt comfortable in creating a physical image of the character Jean but, as other characters crept in and demanded greater space, and more meaningful voice(s), I was faced with the 'problem' of the 'problematized' body (cf Halliwell above), of the person with physical disability or stigmata.

Disability offers a challenge to the representation of the body  
...usually, it means that the disabled body provides insight into  
the fact that all bodies are socially constructed).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body*, *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001) p737

<sup>7</sup> Siebers, op cit, p737

For a time I attempted to engage with the large and growing literature and discourse in the area of the body and disability, some of which I was aware of before I began *Dangerous Devotions*. I found this literature peppered with the binary notions inherent in terms such as disabled/non-disabled, terms which appear and reappear, despite deconstruction in many social constructivist theories of disability, which sees bodily impairment as ‘real’, but disability as both a concept and, more importantly to people’s lives, as a constraint brought about by social practices and beliefs. Disability is constructed in contrast to ability in an ablest society. While much of this theory is interesting and has made a valuable contribution to challenging disabling practices, there was little I could find in it to guide me in the process of writing in the persona of a disabled person.

Then, toward the end of the first draft of *Dangerous Devotions* I came across a journal which helped me reduce or reply to some of my own internal wranglings with what might be called the ethics of representation.

*Narrative*, which comes out quarterly, has published a number of articles which seek to blend cognitive and neurological studies with less empirical work in interpretative and deconstructive theoretical areas. As a psychologist and applied linguist (speech pathologist) with a degree in English Literature and post-graduate work in cultural theory, I found this bringing together of forces to be extremely attractive. I was particularly interested in an article published in *Narrative* in 2004. The article, ‘What are we reading when we read autobiography’ is written by Paul John Eakin<sup>8</sup>. Eakin, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, is the author or editor of

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<sup>8</sup> Paul John Eakin, ‘What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?’ ,*Narrative* 12.2 (2004) pp121-132

a number of works on autobiography. What he writes, though, concerns more than the individual memoir.

Eakin's article situates the identity of the individual not in the external realms of social and political construction but in the neurobiological self ( which Eakin acknowledges as Antonio Damasio's concept). '(S)elf is not some abstract philosophical concept but rather a name for a feeling embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival. Self then ... is first and last *of* and *about* the body...' <sup>9</sup> In Eakin/Damasio's view, then, the self is embodied (in the physiological/neurological processes); at the same time, the self is not dependent on the external appearance of the body. Thus there is an equity of the self, irrespective of external disability. This was a liberating concept to discover.

In Eakin's article, the exploration of Damasio's three-tier model of mental reality (core self, extended consciousness and autobiographical self) brings him back to neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks's claim - 'that each of us constructs and lives a "narrative" and this narrative is us, our identities'<sup>10</sup>. In social constructivist theories of disability, the individual is all too often passive, her/his self, if it is considered at all, largely constructed – whether the individual likes it or not – by social forces. Identity, in Eaken/Damasio's formulation, is active – we construct and live our own narratives.

Furthermore, by situating the identity of the person in the neurobiological self (with no Cartesian dualism) there is an implied assertion that the embodiment of identity cannot be denied, circumvented or expressed merely in language. This sites the self as both organic and temporal. It also makes the self available to the person who does not have language – an extremely important and liberating move for people

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<sup>9</sup> Eakin, op cit, p122

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Eakin, op cit, p121

who cannot speak and/or use language. That is, the self becomes acknowledged in the person with intellectual disability in a manner that many common conceptions of humanity – for example, the human being made separate from the lower orders by access to and use of language – deny. Again, this organic, temporal corporeal self is not an embodied self in the sense that much disability discourse understands it. This self only exists in, and because of, the neurological processes of the brain, processes that cannot be observed, socially valued or devalued by an observer.

Interestingly, too, identity, if it is a product of an individual, internal neurological process, remains ungraspable for anyone outside the particular body – but also for the person in the particular body. For once a moment has been experienced, the precise neurological processes that ‘belonged’ to that moment are past, and cannot be recovered in any exact replica. The memory of the moment – and an experience is a memory within .2 of a second – is stored, not in the neurones that experienced it, but in different neurones, with different connections from the ones that perceived the event. These neurones, with their different associative pathways, will, when (re) excited, stimulate different parts of the brain, different emotions and therefore a slightly different neurobiological self. Eakin, reading Damasio, refers to the ‘movie-in-the-brain’, which ‘engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing’<sup>11</sup>. That is, there is no essential, immutable self but only the sense of one that occurs in a moment, in any particular ‘act of knowing’.

These notions could, of course, threaten, even enrage the writer/author, particularly of biography. If identity is irretrievably corporeal, the subject necessarily remains ungraspable, unknowable, situated, as s/he is, in a body, which is ‘other’ (in relation to the author), elsewhere and quite possibly turned to dust. Similarly,

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<sup>11</sup> Eakin, op cit, p128



logically, the neurobiological self could be a threat to the authenticity of autobiography. If each of us is our neurobiological self, then our identity must constantly shift, change, grow (especially in youth) and possibly retreat (after a night of vociferous alcohol imbibing), as we age.

On the other hand, if identity is momentary - and memory unreliable and both are under constant erasure and reconstruction - or at least if we regard them as such - as writers, and as human beings, we may well find a greater freedom. If there is no set self, then we can imagine more freely, leave the ascribing and inscription of 'real', 'reality', 'truth' to the reader - as in Barthes' famous stricture: '...the unity of the text is not in its origin but in its destination. Which is to say that the unity of a text is not in the author but in the reader, or more accurately in the act of reading'<sup>12</sup>.

For the project of *Dangerous Devotions*, which represents and writes as more than one person with a disability, the idea that the self is inherent to the neurobiology of the human body is one that reduces surface divisions between human beings. We are not who we are because we have a particular form of the body, nor because we are able to use tools or language, but simply because each and every one of our restless brains (not our minds) is, with or without conscious effort, creating us, each and every moment of the day.

Importantly, however, the concept of neurobiological identity does not deny culture. Although Eakin does not go into this, cognitive sciences, allied to neurobiology, offer well-tested supports for the notions that a person from one culture will have different neurological associations, functional definitions, thoughts and what we could call 'filters' stored in their neurones and dendrites. What we perceive and

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<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath (trans), 1977, p145

how we perceive and what we store and how we store this information is intimately intertwined with our culture. We can have our commonality and our difference, too.

Does any of this matter? Does theorising really have any relation to the creation of an imaginary world? For me, it has done. There is both a poetics and politics of representation. To deal with the poetics I had the excellent tutelage of Glenda Adams, Cathy Cole and others at the University of Technology, Sydney. I also returned to the wisdom of Virginia Woolf who, always determined to further the craft of writing, said (and she is quoted here at some length):

Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read but to write: to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words. Recall, then, some event that has left a distinct impression on you – how at the corner of the street perhaps, you passed two people talking. A tree shook; and electric light danced; the tone of the talk was comic, but also tragic; a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in that moment.

But when you attempt to reconstruct it in words, you will find that it breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions. Some must be subdued; others emphasised; in the process you will lose, probably, all grasp upon the emotion itself. Then turn from your blurred and littered pages to the opening pages of some great novelist – Defoe, Jane Austen, Hardy. Now you will be better able to appreciate their mastery. It is not merely that we are in the presence of a different person – Defoe, Jane Austen or Thomas Hardy – but that we are living in a different world.<sup>13</sup>

Woolf's words were prescient: many times during the process of writing *Dangerous Devotions* I realised that I needed to construct and reconstruct. All too often what, in my mind's eye, seemed so intense, so poignant or so grand, read as nothing more than a set of graphical phonemes stamped onto a page. Over and over, I

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<sup>13</sup> Woolf, Virginia, *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, 1973, Harvest Books, London

found myself not with a scramble of littered pages but with a single, coherent and solidly boring narrative. I persisted and hope that I have learned.

Eakin's formulation of neurobiological identity complements Woolf, providing a way of looking at, questioning and working positively with, the politics of representation and identity.

In the end, however, the hand that moves the pen is not an innocent one. What I write, who I write 'as', how I express what I have to say; these all involve selections, choices and skills. The more artful the pen becomes, the less innocence it can claim. For me to write well, it has been important to feel comfortable that I am not crossing ethical boundaries, not – as one of my clients with mental illness once put it – 'stealing the stories of others'. To find a voice for each of my characters, I have needed to be able to relax into the selves that people my imaginative world, whether a 'self' has a disability or not. It has been good to think that each of my characters can, simultaneously, exist without me, the author, and yet be a person with whose thought processes I can be intimate, no matter how little physical or environmental commonality I have with them.

As I hand in my novel, *Dangerous Devotions*, I am pleased to have worked through some of the theory and come to a point where I feel good, quite simply good, about what I have written.

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