



The Possibilities for the Social Novel in a Contemporary Context

A dissertation in two volumes

Volume 1 – She Wore Pants: A Novel
Volume 2 – Realism in a Postmodern World:
Exegesis

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Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will in the future be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide.

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Abstract

‘The Possibilities for the Social Novel in a Contemporary Context’ consists of two volumes. The first is a novel, ‘She Wore Pants’, and the second is a dissertation titled ‘Realism in a Postmodern World.’ Together, these volumes constitute my research on the genre of the social novel within the context of contemporary American fiction, arguing that a return to early twentieth-century realism will not result in a literature that is culturally relevant at this point in time.

This inquiry began with a decision to write a novel based on the 2008 global financial crisis, featuring a female financier-protagonist who succeeds on male-dominated Wall Street. How might one write such a novel today? Contemporary literary fiction contains few examples of the kind of social realism that characterised early twentieth-century fiction. In addition, I discovered through the writing process and through critical research that it is difficult to write in that way now. The nature of society has changed, and along with it the nature, function, and form of fiction has changed.

In a culture awash with hyper-reality characterised by replicas of the ‘real’ made available through cultural experiences including, though not limited to, Reality TV and cable news, the internet and social media, contemporary readers and writers seek something different from literary fiction. Instead of tragic realism, the contemporary novelist exploring broad social themes produces, for the most part, a type of social comedy described by literary critic James Wood in *The Irresponsible Self* as ‘the comedy of forgiveness’ (8). Wood traces the origins of the comedy of forgiveness to Freud’s concept of the unconscious and the notion that the depth of an

individual's character can never really be known. Contemporary readers and writers accept the inherent unreliability that corresponds with this idea, and can laugh with and forgive characters who may not deserve forgiveness, because in the end they are only human and worthy of our sympathy. Moreover, comedy is inherently social; its corresponding humorous effect depends upon a shared understanding of the social rules being broken. As Freud pointed out in *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, humorous exchanges relieve emotional tension and conserve emotional energy that might otherwise be spent in anger or resentment or repression (115). Certainly our postmodern culture is not dissimilar to previous points in history in terms of its sources of social conflict based on gender, class, sexuality, religion, and economic disparity. What has changed is how we regard these conflicts and the way they are expressed in the form of the novel. Wall Street's contemporary hyper-reality has the effect of making comic the once tragic demise of greatness. We laugh and cry at its hubris.

In the novel, 'She Wore Pants', Candace Cerise Pansenosky, daughter of a shoe factory manager, rises from her humble New Jersey origins to become the unicorn of the species: a female Wall Street investment banker who has it all – wealth, looks, power – and risks everything, including prison, when she learns the unintended consequences of her financial innovations.

Shortly after being made a full partner at her firm, Candace discovers that the Livesburg Tennessee School Board invested in one of her abstract financial instruments exposed to sub-prime mortgages. The school board lost all of its money. Unable to pay its debts, teachers' salaries, or its operating expenses, the board runs out

of options. Candace cracks a scheme to save the Livesburg County School Board and, with it, herself.

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Although this work is my own, one does not write a dissertation without assistance.

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Dr Yvonne Miels copy-edited the final text, catching the minor issues that are easily missed when reading one's own work. Her contribution remained limited to the terms and conditions outlined in The University of Adelaide's policy on thesis editing.

The first chapter of 'She Wore Pants' placed first in Lightship Publishing's 2012 First Chapter Contest.

She Wore Pants
A Novel

Volume 1