



# The Possibilities for the Social Novel in a Contemporary Context

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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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Martina Newhook

October 2012

# 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.

# Acknowledgements

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

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Brian Castro, who poked, prodded and encouraged my thinking through astute questions and reading recommendations.

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Dr Dianne Schwerdt, my co-supervisor provided objective and sober second thoughts.

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.

# **Realism in a Postmodern World**

**Exegesis**

**Volume 2**

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## Introduction

This exegesis is a discourse on the nature of the contemporary realistic social novel in American literary fiction and the opportunities for writing such a novel today. It explores the process of writing the social novel ‘She Wore Pants’ within the context of a historical body of American social fiction about finance and business. The central argument is that literary social realism in the manner of nineteenth and early twentieth-century realists such as Charles Dickens, Émile Zola, and Upton Sinclair, is no longer possible in the contemporary context – which is not say that it can never happen again; literature does not follow a linear development as does medicine for example. Modernity’s legacy has altered the nature and form of fiction, and contemporary social novelists can no longer find relevance reporting on the state of the world in their fiction; nor can they produce Aristotelian tragedy, where an individual’s strength becomes the flaw that unalterably changes his social world. Instead, such writers tend to produce comedy or satire in response to the nature of our postmodern society – a society influenced by the rise of the internet and globalised mass media, as well as a profound expansion of scientific knowledge.

In *The Irresponsible Self* (2005), James Wood explains that ‘secular or modern tragicomedy, the comedy of forgiveness, is almost the inversion of the Aristotelian idea. It is almost entirely the creation of the modern novel’ (8). Wood’s notion of the

comedy of forgiveness posits that contemporary comic novels are about forgiveness for those who may not deserve it, rather than about punishment for those who merit correction (8). In novels produced by contemporary writers as diverse as Philip Roth and Jennifer Egan, among others, we forgive their characters' flaws because we are reminded that we do not in fact know everything that there is to know about them, that individuals are complicated, as is our society and its socially interconnected nature.

In 1961, Philip Roth pointed out in his essay 'Writing American Fiction' that fiction writers' imaginations were outstripped by the daily reality of American culture and society, and that

...the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. (224)

Roth's emphasis on the word 'credible' is both significant and prescient. If the real world is so absurd that when it is placed within the imagined reality of a novel it no longer rings true, then the writer of literary fiction has no choice but to find new ways of representing reality. Roth himself uses comic effects in several of his novels, including two that were produced more than thirty years after his essay and are arguably among his finest: *The Human Stain* and *Sabbath's Theater*.

In support of the argument that contemporary novelists cannot produce works similar to those of early twentieth-century realists, an overview of the business novel as a genre is followed by an analysis of Tom Wolfe's 1989 essay 'Stalking the Billion Footed Beast' in which he called for a return to social realism in American literary fiction. Using Wolfe's novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, as my example, I argue that his rationale was flawed. His approach resulted in satire rather than the social realism

he claimed to have written. Then, two social novels published after the turn of new millennium, Jane Smiley's *Good Faith* and Kate Jennings's *Moral Hazard*, are compared and contrasted. Using the work of leading literary critics Wayne C. Booth, John Gardner, and James Wood, along with postmodern culture theorist Ulrich Beck, I argue that Smiley's novel is my preferred model for producing social fiction. In Chapter Four I provide a subjective overview of the challenges that I faced while writing 'She Wore Pants', including my findings regarding the difficulty in producing a convincing realistic tragedy about an individual, as well as the significance of the point of view.

Finally, using James Wood's body of criticism, in which he argues that the best novels today are those where internal realities are rendered believable through the eyes and voices of their characters rather than the author, I defend my artistic choices, including the novel's comic ending. I conclude that the social nature of my novel is derived not from its portrayal of the external realities that created the financial crisis, but from its deeper connection to the dramatised lives portrayed in its story world, as well as its affirmation of real life experiences that are shared by people other than the author.

\*

'She Wore Pants' was not an easy novel to write. The process forced me to reflect on the nature of fiction writing and my approach to the novel. Inspired by real events and influenced by my feminist politics, early drafts were examples of how not to write fiction. These initial drafts constitute my creative research. What makes creative research different from other research is that the artist must destroy her research in pursuit of a finished unique artefact. Upon completing the novel, I turned to my

exegesis. Through this process of exegetical research in combination with my creative research, I came to understand the complex interplay between social changes and the corresponding changes in literature. Calls by Tom Wolfe and Kate Jennings for a return to early twentieth-century realism in literature are based on nostalgia and ignore the profound technological and social shifts of modernity.