

Volume Two

The Exegesis

Writing the Sixties

Doug McEachern

June 2016

Writing the Sixties

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Making the Sixties in Writing	5
1.1 Variants on the Sixties Novel	5
1.1.1 Mailer and Michener	5
1.1.2 Farina and Egan	8
1.1.3 Byatt and Amis	10
1.1.4 The Australians	13
1.1.5 The Sixties as Normal	17
1.2 The Anatomy of a Sixties Novel	20
Chapter 2: Signs of the Time	22
2.1 John Updike	22
2.1.1 Rabbit Redux	22
2.1.2 Witches of Eastwick	31
2.2 Philip Roth	34
2.3 Conclusion	42
Chapter 3: Research and Creative Writing	43
3.1 Practice-led Research	43
3.2 Research for Rewriting the Sixties	46
3.2.1 Research	47
3.2.2 Writing	51
3.3 The Role of Research	55
3.3.1 The Scientific Hypothesis	55
3.3.2 A Metaphor for Research	63

3.4 Conclusion 65

Conclusion: What Is Research For? 67

List of Works Cited 72

Introduction

In 1968 my birth date was drawn in the national conscription ballot. My life had already been affected by Australia's foreign and domestic political debates. When in high school I opposed both the introduction of conscription in 1964 and the commitment of Australian troops to Vietnam in 1965. Being called up merely increased my alienation, encouraged my radicalisation and motivated increased militancy. As the movement of opposition grew and police clashed with radical and moderate demonstrators, I was delighted to see the policy settings unravel, paving the way for the ALP to campaign against the war and conscription as part of the 1972 Federal election campaign. The end of conscription in 1972 and the gradual withdrawal of Australia troops were not enough. I left Australia in 1973 with no plans to return. Before going I researched and wrote a Master's Degree under the title *Demonstrations: Law and Society, South Australia, 1966-May 1972*. Despite my earlier intentions, in 1978 I came back to the University of Adelaide and the Department of Politics. For a few years I taught an honours course on the Big Books of the 1960s and then let the topic lie. Much later when I happened to be in Adelaide again, I walked the streets, visited familiar places and started to sketch the outlines of characters and stories for a novel about the 1960s. It was ill-formed and incomplete and I put it aside while I worked at other crafts.

I found myself puzzling over the gap between what I had done analytically to understand the era and what my recollections told me about how I felt at the time. There was little connection between the two. My analysis had been narrowly focused and confined to tracing the developing radicalism of students opposed to the war and conscription and the clashes between demonstrators and the police. My feelings, my

recollections, were of the warm relations between friends facing uncertainty and striving against government and social constraints, ranging from the fact of conscription to the everyday, routine vexations that came from frequent, trivial clashes over clothes, long hair and culture.

I wanted to revisit the events of the 1960s but not to write a history, a memoir or any form of cultural, political or social analysis. I wanted to write fiction, to find ways to write the Sixties, addressing the individual and emotional dimensions of the times so as to create a plausible sense of the period, centred as much around anxiety and tension as celebration of the pursuit of personal liberty. This exegesis takes just a few examples of the way the writing of the Sixties changed over the years and then explores related themes about research and creative writing. There were puzzles I needed to understand before I could complete the writing of such a novel. I began by reading widely, looking for the forms of a novel appropriate to my task and ambitions.

One of the first challenges was to be precise about the era. The kinds of characters and events which would easily encompass the spirit of the age associated with the rise of the Vietnam War and conscription were not confined to a single decade, the 1960s. If the term 'the 1960s' simply refers to the events of the years between the 1st of January 1960 and the 31st of December 1969, the broader social and cultural meanings shared with parts of the adjoining decade would be lost. For some projects this would not matter but, for this creative work the culture, spirit and politics of the age started in the middle of the 1960s and continued into the 1970s. In 1965 the first Australian troops were committed to Vietnam. Their withdrawal began in 1970 and was completed by 1972, leaving only a small logistics presence. The war

ended in 1975 when Vietnam was reunified. Reinforcing this span of years, conscription was announced in late 1964 just prior to the commitment of troops and ended in 1972 with the election of the Whitlam government. The key incidents of the creative work are linked to these political events, the rise of student militancy and all the other associated characteristics of the age; music, drugs, the counter-culture and the pursuit of personal freedom. I have used the term 'the Sixties' for this slightly off-set chronology rather than a strict decadal definition, as it captures better the essence of the era in question.

The phrase 'Writing the Sixties' also captures the essentially imagined, fictional construction of the era. I am interested in the way those who write about the 1960s, write the Sixties, where all the techniques of fiction are combined to depict the cultural character of the age. Hence the exegesis starts with novels about the Sixties, tracing different ways in which novels written either at the time or close to it compare with the research and writing strategies of those who come after or who seek, from a later vantage point, to re-imagine the Sixties. In this chapter a broad range of novels are treated as if they formed a genre: the novels of the Sixties. I am particularly interested in how authors characterise or judge the era they are writing about. The second chapter examines three novels, two by John Updike and one by Philip Roth, two distinguished American novelists whose popularity and fame started in the 1960s. The focus here is on the strategies they use to sign the time setting for their novels. This chapter is used to build a foundation for considering the role of research in creative writing and its relationship to the research strategies underpinning the novel *Stardust and Golden*.

To write the Sixties in the form of a novel, half a century later, involves various forms of research to retrieve the era and to characterise it. This introduces the question of how research and creative practice are related in the writing of fiction. What kind of research do creative writers do as they seek to reach back to the Sixties to make it live again as the setting for a novel? Is the research the same as that done by, for example, social scientists or historians studying the events of the era? How is research related to the creative practice of writing fiction? These are not new questions and the extensive Australian debate over practice-led research and its associated variants are central to a consideration of these themes in the third chapter.