

Looking for Bertha Strehlow – giving voice to silence

Abstract:

Silence is a prevailing theme in the story of Bertha Strehlow (1911-1984). She lived in Central Australia in the 1930's at a time when very few white women had. Bertha was the first wife of Central Australian anthropologist and linguist TGH (Ted) Strehlow (1908-1978). Her story has been largely overshadowed by the dominance of his career and publications, despite her pivotal role in the development of his work. While examining the historical silence that surrounds her, I explore Gilles Deleuze's concept of the 'two books', to help unravel the problem of fictionalizing the story of an historical character. This conceptual framework explains my impulse to write about this little known woman.

The paper also looks at the characteristics of the verse novel and explores how it is an effective genre for the development of a narrative to give voice to historical silences. I include two poems from my creative work: *At the end of the frost*, a verse novel from Bertha's point of view, to demonstrate how poetics in the verse novel can illustrate the gaps in the narrative of historical fiction and how it is an effective literary device to explore silence in history.

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Introduction

As the study of any biographical work unfolds, contradictions and conundrums in the life of the subject are uncovered. Bertha Strehlow is no exception. While fulfilling the traditional role of the ‘wife’ in the 1930’s, she also wrote publicly about the poor treatment of Aboriginal people in Central Australia by pastoralists and the government.ⁱ Despite this, there are few records of her or her attempts to speak out about her concerns regarding the injustices around her.

Bertha (1911-1984) was the first wife of the anthropologist and linguist TGH (Ted) Strehlow (Jones 2002).ⁱⁱ She lived in Central Australia from 1936 for six years and travelled widely, writing and assisting Ted in his workⁱⁱⁱ. But Bertha’s story has been largely overshadowed by the dominance of her husband, despite her pivotal role in the development of his career through the editing of his work.

In this paper I explore how poetry, and the verse novel in particular, is effective in the exploration of Bertha’s silence and how this can give her the opportunity to speak.

A conceptual question: Deleuze

While searching for a possible framework that might make sense of my impulse to write about Bertha as well as dealing the issues of imagination and ethics in historical fiction, I was relieved to read the work of historian Tom Griffin (2009:8) and French postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze^{iv}. Griffin discusses the writers’ conflict when faced with writing ‘truth telling’ and fiction. He proposes that:

Imagination must work in the creative friction with a given world, there are rules as well as freedoms, there are hard edges of reality one must respect...There are silences not of our making...These silences and uncertainties should be part of any story we tell (2009:8).

To work with these ‘hard edges’, ‘these silences’, I have explored a theoretical approach that suggests a way to understand my writing of Bertha’s story. I examine a concept highlighted by Deleuze and ask: is it possible to use his concept of ‘the two books’ to expose the untold story of Bertha Strehlow?

Deleuze theorised that for every writer there are two books to be written: the book in ink and the book that is etched on the soul^v. He said ‘A great book is always the inverse of another book that could be only written in the soul, with silence and blood (Deleuze 1997).’ Is it possible then to tell the story written on the soul - for the writer to ‘speak’ as Bertha?

To consider applying this theory to the problem of writing for, or about, an historical figure, the different aspects of the person’s life need to be considered. The primary sources of information on Bertha Strehlow includes the writings about Bertha by Ted in his many diaries (Strehlow 1955), the limited work she published, and her letters, all of which contribute to the ‘book written in ink’. This includes evidence of her travels across the desert by camel in 1936 and her grave illness following the miscarriage of her baby near Kata Tjuta (Mt Olga)^{vi}.

The inverse then is the verse novel that becomes the inner story - the ‘book of the soul’ – the silent story. Using this theory may provide a framework for stepping into Bertha’s space, to develop an understanding of a character across time.^{vii}

While I have enjoyed the poetic image of the book of the soul, there have been critics of the concept. Academic and commentator on Deleuze, Ian Buchanan, suggests a difficulty with this theory. He argues that in writing ‘the book of the soul’ yet another book is created and the book of the soul continues to remain unread because it is always defined by its absence (Buchanan 2000:3-4). Despite this criticism, I still feel this is a useful concept, as it helps me to explain why my work on Bertha, which is fiction, will only ever hint at the book of the soul.

Further to this, an exploration of the literature shows the versatility of the verse novel, and demonstrates it is an effective genre that has frequently has been used to explore the ‘book of the soul’. This is particularly evident in the verse novels of poets Emily Ballou in her work on Charles Darwin (2009), and Anna Kerdijk Nicholson in her work on James Cook (2010). The works are good examples of ‘the creative friction’ as expressed by Griffin (2009:8) as stories that extend the known outer historical landscape of the characters and touch on the silence of their inner landscape.

The Verse Novel and Historical Fiction

Using verse to explore biography can hint at the empty spaces of history^{viii} - ‘the unknown’, by placing possibilities there.^{ix} Through poetry the vivid moments of Bertha’s life in Central Australia are told. This brings her *into* the writing and explores her as a character living at a significant time in history. The verse novel as a genre intuitively reveals her part in the history. The historical events of Bertha’s life and the information about the era drive the plot, moving the story forward while the interweaving themes of place and belonging are explored by inner reflective poems. The poems explore insights into her as a character that aim to challenge some of the stereotypes of the female ‘pioneer’ (2005).^x

Writer and commentator on Australian verse novels, Christopher Pollnitz, (2009:235) suggests that the verse novel form is effective for use in historical fiction because can push the author into ‘quasi-confessional intensity’^{xi} by the use of the first person monologue. By writing about Bertha in the first person, it is possible to do as Pollnitz suggests and interrogate the inner landscape of the character. The following poem is an example of this. Bertha has just suffered a miscarriage on an epic camel trip and is gravely ill. The poem allows an insight into her character at a moment of grief and fear.

Beauty

Beauty is a young man
so filled with fear and passion
he breathes his secrets to me.

Here the desert sky
reaches beyond the heavens.
As the night blackens
it presses down on us and
he speaks of loss –
of being utterly alone,
and we pray
that God will save us.

I feel calm – safe,
and tell him
my big secret – of the man I loved first.
I feel my husband pull away
from me.

But we are here alone –
our baby gone now.

Her tiny, hardly formed body
buried by the tree
where I have cried myself empty.

And now my
cloths
stain the waterhole
pink.

I watch him,
bent by the sand
as he washes them.
There is no one else.
(Shilton 2011)

For this poem and others in *At the end of the Frost*, I have used the writing technique of parataxis to evoke a sense that the characters are ‘outside time’ in the desert. This technique enables the past, present and future to intersect in the lives of the characters (Mallan & McGillis 2003) as past events come into the present at this moment of crisis for Bertha. The continuity of time has a metaphorical effect as it evokes the timelessness of the desert and thus operates at a deeper level across the whole story: Writers Mallan & McGillis discuss this technique:

Parataxis stretches out connections, suggests the continuity between past, present, and future, lends to an apparent equal importance of all experience, and of course refuses to privilege one character or one object or one place over

another. In other words, in a paratactic space one may successfully avoid rule: boundaries are fluid rather than rigidly demarcated (2003:4).

Ted and Bertha are altered from this moment on. The intensity of the present, with the shocking loss of their first child, with the fear and intimacy it evokes, and their absolute physical isolation, impacts future events that will always be overshadowed by the past.

The use of this technique as well as others such as fragmentation, metaphor and imagery, can evoke an intense emotional response in the reader. This stimulus to the imagination helps the reader to fill in the gaps as the characters step out of history and become more identifiably human^{xii}.

The development of character can help to explain the increasing popularity of this genre and its use in the writing of historical fiction as the character is speaking directly to the reader. The characters in *At the End of the Frost* are historical figures and the story has the basis of fact, but uses fictional devices where Bertha tells the story she may never have spoken aloud. For instance, in a paper Bertha published documenting the camel trek her and Ted took in 1936 (Strehlow 1945), she does not mention the loss of the baby nor her subsequent illness and brush with death. This information is only revealed in a letter to her mother in law (Strehlow 1936).

As I write about Bertha I find myself looking into her 'quiet' past. I am writing about an historical character not widely known, who has had very little, if anything written about her. Besides the primary sources, there are no historical texts, commentary or theoretical works on Bertha^{xiii}. Thus there is a real sense of the writing coming out of silence.

Place and creativity

Poet and screenwriter, Emily Ballou, in her background essay on her poetry about Charles Darwin, talks about walking by the same river that Darwin walked beside many years earlier. It was this, and the reading of his work that was the beginnings of a relationship. She says:

It's an act of affinity that allows two historically separated people to briefly, simultaneously, exist together in a new form. Weaving the mask of Charles Darwin and transporting myself into another time ...also allowed me to explore philosophical concerns I felt otherwise unable to write-as-myself (2010:2-3).

Likewise, Bertha and I have shared the setting of Central Australia, her for six years and me for twenty-six, separated by nearly fifty years. This shared setting has allowed me to ‘jump time and perspective’ (2010:2) as Ballou suggests and to imagine myself in Bertha’s space, enabling the creative process to unfold around her.

Emily Ballou discusses creating a ‘portrait’ of Darwin in words (2010:1-2); ‘Tiny moments and thoughts, like collage slowly assembled, once drawn together make a face (p2).’ Similarly as I focus on Bertha’s writing and her turn of phrase in the limited work she left, my poems shift between fact and fiction as the story arrives like a ‘wave at my feet’ (Brophy 2003:171).

Initially, my writing on Bertha focused on the romantic possibilities in the story; the love of a man, the sense of adventure, the desert... but it soon became clear that the story had deeper complexities; the physical and geographical challenges of the era, control in the marriage, and the difficulties of the ‘pioneering’ aspects to Ted’s work^{xiv} (McClintock 1995). Taking these complexities into the writing have help develop a multiplicity of layers in the work. The collage slowly assembled (Ballou 2010:2) and led to this poem – the first poem in the story:

The Gramophone

The music moves against the canvas.

I am dancing,

my skirt could be silk

and my shoes

fine sandals.

He holds me, murmurs in my ear.

I try to remember

what it was he said,

to make me leave my green hills –

my parents.

He spoke in coloured dreams

that turned my head -

stories of nomads and deserts.

Spoke in a language that

rose and fell –
an ancient music.

It could have been Africa
we were coming to,
a more different world
I couldn't imagine.

The gramophone
is a link
to my old life,
and here I dance with him -
my feet in thick shoes,
stepping lightly
through the dust.
(Shilton 2011)

The sparseness of the poetic image attempts to achieve what Brophy (2003:86-87) describes as breaking up the usual path of communication;

‘Poetry tends to fragment the normal progression of language, thought and experience. We are suspended upon ambiguities or upon the multiple meanings of images’ (p86).

The reader - ‘the assumed third party’ (Ballou 2010:3), brings the images to life as the words on the page mix with the reader’s own memory and experience. The spaces are filled; coloured in by the reader.

Conclusion

Feminist writer Adrienne Rich speaks of women’s historical role being:

a luxury for man... served as the painter’s model and the poet’s muse, but also as comforter, nurse, cook, bearer of his seed, secretarial assistant and copier of manuscripts (1980:36).

It is Bertha’s silent life that I hope my work is giving voice to, the woman who has a quiet presence in history. As I write the poems of Bertha I return to the primary sources as a guide for the poems. These tell the story while the structure of the verse novel unfolds as a natural genre for this. The beauty of Deleuze’s image of the book

written on the soul has found it's way into the writing processes of Bertha's story, and while I'm mindful of the debate over the validity and 'truth' in historical fiction, Deleuze's concept remains a guide in imagining and writing my work. The impulse to write Bertha's story leads to facing the silences. As Griffin has suggested (2009:8) I am looking into silence 'not of my making', but in doing so I hope to honour the work in giving her voice.

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ⁱ B. Strehlow (1945)

ⁱⁱ TGH Strehlow (1908-1978), who was born and grew up at the Hermannsburg Mission, was a major contributor to the linguistic and anthropological understanding and knowledge of the Aranda peoples of Central Australia. His vast collection of writings, films, photographs and sacred artifacts are now housed in the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs.

ⁱⁱⁱ TGH Strehlow didn't publish his major work *Songs of Central Australia* (A&U) until 1971, by which time he had left Bertha and their children (Strehlow 1971)

^{iv} Deleuze (1925-1995) French postmodern philosopher 'Became known for writing about other philosophers with new insights and different readings (Roffe 2005:1).'

^v As explored by Deleuze in his philosophical theory of 'the two books', that being: for every book written in ink, there is another book written on the soul (Deleuze, cited in Buchanan 2000:3-9)

^{vi} In October 1936, not long after returning from the six month camel trek through 1000 km of desert in south west of Alice Springs, Bertha wrote a letter to her mother in law Frieda Strehlow, to let her know

they had arrived at Hermannsburg safely. In the letter Bertha tells Frieda she miscarried on the trek and Ted had to make a frame on the side of the camel to carry her back. In the letter she plays down how sick she really was, this information comes from Ted's diaries (Strehlow 1936 Personal Diary 3)

^{vii} See Ballou (2010) and Brophy (2003)

^{viii} The 'deficit' model of history discussed in Nelson (2007:1)

^{ix} These 'gaps' or empty spaces were discussed by Gail Jones at the University of Adelaide 4X4 Master class (25th August 2010), on writing fiction. Jones talked specifically of writing coming from loss, from the gaps that loss creates (personal notes; Shilton, 2010)

^x Like Paisley, (2005 xvii) 'I wondered how white women living at the [first decades of last century] contributed, if anything, to [the Aboriginal] struggle.'

^{xi} The genre has also been used to good effect by writers of YAF in 'coming of age' novels that favour the first person narrative (Herrick 2001; Wild, 2001)

^{xii} As demonstrated in the synopsis of Emily Ballou's work on Darwin: 'saves the man from legend, bringing to light a fragile, deeply felt humanity, and capturing the textures of his work and dreams...' (Ballou 2009)

^{xiii} Bertha wrote a number of articles about her desert experiences (1945 & 1949) and spoke at the 1944 Royal Geographical Society conference (1945, pp31-48). In 2006, the Director of the Strehlow Research Centre (SRC), Dr Brett Mitchell, gathered together information about Bertha from family and friends for a new exhibition. He called the exhibition *Desert Honeymoon*, (2006) and through film, photography and a brief commentary, it relayed information that focused solely on Bertha.

^{xiv} 'The idea that the unknown was the land, (virgin) land to be explored, unveiled by male explorers (McClintock 1995:22)