

# The Path Less Trodden

## From Research to Creative Practice<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: This essay critically reviews my own academic career and creative practice, and argues that there can be a fruitful crossover between the methodologies of historical research and creative writing. I discuss the issue of artistic innovation and the cultural conditions most likely to foster it, analyse the notion of discursive density, and argue for the necessity of eclecticism in social and gender politics. The paper works with the themes of Adornment, Documents, Assimilations, and the Numinous, and argues for the existence of creative scholarship and grounded fiction.*

When you get to a certain age as an academic, you need to make a critical assessment of your writing. If you want to remain intellectually fresh, you have to critique your own methodology, be prepared to make major shifts, and to be flexible. The imagination can flourish inside the academy as well as outside it, and it can do so in new ways if you give your creativity the right kind of encouragement. To avoid becoming an intellectual fossil, you need to put your old insights and methods to new uses, and to be prepared to take risks. When I reviewed my own published work, which was unorthodox in many ways, it was clear that it was fuelled by an interest in repressed aspects of film history: working-class audiences and films for women, for example (Harper, *Women in British Cinema*). I was concerned with visual style and the way in which cultural codes were imprinted into it (Harper and Smith, *British Film Culture in the 1970s*). I was also interested in the representation

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of history and the way in which film texts could usher in contradictory interpretations of events, which had a profound effect on their social function (Harper, *Picturing the Past*). I was part of a group that argued for the establishment of “the new film history”—a type of analysis that was deductive in method, and relied on primary sources culled from archives, rather than on inductive theoretical models (Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, *The New Film History*). I wanted to find out more about the *armature* of film texts—that irreducible structure of meaning and myth which lies beneath the surface of a film or genre. And above all, I wanted to import into academic discourse a different kind of style: a moist, fruity, irreverent language.

I could continue along the same path: or I could take an adjacent one and continue my investigations in a different medium. I wished to work in another mode. So, after my Outstanding Achievement Award from the British Association of Film, Television and Theatre Studies in 2017, I started to write fictional short stories. My master is the Ovid of *The Metamorphoses* and *Ars Amatoria*, and so my stories are informed by the themes of transformation and surprise. They are in the Gothic mode. Their emotional temperature is febrile and the proportions are jagged. They have a playfulness about them, and they often combine the erotic with comic elements. I published 200 short stories on my website ([www.sueharper.co.uk](http://www.sueharper.co.uk)). It had many thousands of hits, and in 2020, Egaeus Press published *The Dark Nest*, which sold out immediately and had extremely good reviews (Harper, *The Dark Nest*). I am currently completing a second collection called *The Sarah Chronicles*.

In this paper, I want to examine the ways in which continuities can be forged between academic methods and creative writing, and to use my own stories as a sort of test-case. It is important to stress at the outset that a mechanical application of academic methodology to creative writing will be unproductive. They are different kinds of activity: but they can mutually illuminate one another and can stimulate new types of approach. Historical research is by its very nature less instinctive than creative work, and the latter often conceals its intellectual roots. But we need to be aware of them, and to feel free to challenge them. Both academic and creative writing are innovatory when they challenge taboos: but they do it in distinctive ways, since they each march to a different drum.

When thinking about the creative process, we need to have a working model of cultural innovation: that is to say, of the conditions that are conducive to new thinking, or to the transformation of old methods. It seems to me that there is a “tipping point” in cultural analysis as well as in creative work: a certain amount

of repetition needs to take place in the cultural sphere before exasperation or fatigue sets in. Practitioners will not innovate before the old models are exhausted. Cultural transformation takes place in an atmosphere of contradiction: between the security (and also staleness) of the old, and the excitement (and also danger) of the new. In analysing patterns of cultural production, therefore, it is crucial for the academic historian to identify which genres fulfil important cultural tasks, for how long a period, and for what reasons. The creative writer needs to identify their own relationship to dominant or emergent genres or modes of thought, and to present this process in an attractive way. Basically, the creative writer has to be able to locate themselves in a precise spot within the fictional pantheon, and to know why they are there. The issues of *rhythm* and *intensity* are crucial for both academic and creative writers, when they are trying to draw the map of cultural production and locate themselves within it: the rhythm of the artistic events, and the intensity with which they are delivered. Sometimes both academics and creative writers can have an instinct that their purpose is to fill a critical or cultural hiatus: and that instinct commands attention, always. In my own case, my twentieth-century literary influences (in terms of narrative structure) were Hemingway, Angela Carter, and John Kennedy Toole; in terms of style, they were E. F. Benson, A. E. Housman, and Philip Pullman. I had to decide what to do with my masters: where to imitate them, and when to abandon them. Like everyone else, I had to find out where the gaps were, and decide if I could fill them.

Cultural researchers have to select from a huge range of evidence and make orderly patterns from it. The production, distribution and (on occasion) exhibition of artefacts has to be taken into account, as well as material about the various types of authorship, response, and contextual writings. The academic writer has to categorise evidence and to rank it in order of significance. The creative writer has to do this too: to decide which are the most important determinants in the world which they describe, and to establish how the different spheres of influence operate in the text.

It is the researcher's task to pick their way through the forest of discourses in the material that they find, and to locate them historically. They need to deploy a high degree of self-awareness in the way they do this, and to show that they are self-critical too. The same holds good for the creative writer. They must be aware of their own discourse and its debts, and they must above all be aware of their own ideological freight: of the echoes, experiences and quotations which reside deep

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within their own work. They may choose to display or conceal them: but they need to know that they are there.

I think that it is unhelpful to espouse a single theoretical model in academic work. A straightforwardly Marxist or feminist approach can reduce the richness of material selected for analysis, and it can usher in an inductive methodology. In 1980s Britain, for example, the work of Lacan became modish (if not *de rigueur*) in film studies in circles such as the influential journal, *Screen*. This gave rise to a narrow critical orthodoxy and a jargon-riddled *côterie* which dominated the discipline for a while. Rather, it is important to be catholic in the theoretical models we employ, and to use them eclectically. And creative writing needs to be a “broad church” too. An exclusively Marxist or feminist approach will inevitably produce fiction which is doctrinaire and dry. Reading it will bestow a sense of righteousness but little pleasure, since its business is to close down narrative options, rather than to open them up.

So far, I have rehearsed a number of ways in which academic and creative writing can enter into a productive relationship with each other. It is crucial to stress that *procedurally* the two types of work are quite distinct. Unless we admit that, we cannot really use them to illuminate each other. But if we operate in a mindful way, we can begin to work with the categories of creative scholarship and grounded fiction. The first is a fluid methodology which interprets what it finds, but always with self-awareness and the willingness to be surprised. The second is a type of writing which invents a world, but with a solid consciousness of the author’s own intellectual heritage and narrative methods.

I will now go on to discuss my own fictional work and its academic hinterland. It needs to be stressed yet again that the relationship between the two is not mechanical or hierarchical, but dialectical and dynamic. That means it is often unpredictable. I shall structure the discussion under the headings of adornment, historical documents, assimilations, gender symbolism, and the Numinous. In each section, I will refer to stories on my website and will indicate which volume they are in.

### ADORNMENT

In my work on the visual languages of film, that of costume was of paramount importance, and I tried to look at the issue of its *agency*. I tried to analyse not only the production constraints on costume work in British cinema, but also the relative autonomy which the discourse could attain: that is to say, how the (usually female)

costume designers dealt with the studio hierarchies, and how they manufactured their own style (Harper 2000, 2012, 2019, 2021). I came to think that costume and adornment (including jewellery and hairstyles) were uniquely placed as cultural forms to carry subliminal messages about gender, class, and desire. This work, which was empirical in method (interviews, studio publicity material), was also based upon instinctive responses to textiles and visual texture.

A large number of my stories have the same preoccupation. But the academic concern with the historical agency of the costume designer gets transferred in the fictional stories onto the dresses or ensembles themselves, and they take on a life of their own and often act in a destructive manner. They consume those who create or wear them, and the female body becomes both the site and the instigator of innovation. In my academic work, I investigated the circumstances in which, in film texts, any one discourse can become dominant or autonomous: in the stories, that process has been completed, because I believe that you cannot, in fiction, show discursive struggle on the page without alienating your reader. What I wanted to do in the stories was to do something different: to interrogate the *means whereby* a visual style has become coherent, while still bearing traces of its own production conditions. And I needed to excavate, in full sight, the pleasures and pains conferred by the world of adornment. I wanted to recognise in print the possibility that flesh is never just an envelope, but rather a soft tissue which bears the imprint of social signs.

I have written some 20 stories in which costume is a major signifier. “The Frocks” (vol. 4) deals with a young designer who struggles to establish a new style: “the frocks she made were outrageously, mellifluously feminine. The layers, the peplums, the frills were dizzyingly excessive in a way that appealed to those who had unacknowledged hungers.” Her creations devour her clients, welding themselves to their rib-cages. In “Fashion Hunger” (vol. 5), a doll develops an obsession with couture, and tortures its owner to make miniature models of Dior and Chanel dresses. And in “The Fascinator” (vol. 5), wedding hats take on a life of their own, and they manufacture adornments that are profoundly unsuitable for the occasion. In all the costume stories, both the makers and the wearers of the clothes are rendered utterly helpless in the face of the savage autonomy of the ensembles. They are gruesome little tales: but I hope they demonstrate that the field of fabric and the tactile pleasures of its consumption is fruitful for both researchers and creative writers, who are not as far removed from each other as one might think. It is possible that

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the theme of dress and adornment might make the stories only attractive to female readers: but I hope not.

### HISTORY AND DOCUMENTS

My first academic book, *Picturing the Past*, was about the representation of history in British cinema in the 30s and 40s and was based entirely on archival material. What I concluded was that every scrap of paper was something that had survived by accident and could be read in a number of ways. History is not a monolith, but a process, and it bears witness not only to presences (the agency of creators and thinkers) but also to absences (those who got ignored or edited out of the process). In my fiction, I tried to develop these ideas, but in a more implicit way. In “The Cave Painters” (vol. 5), the heroine Sarah scrambles through a slit in a rock to find unknown neolithic cave paintings, which deploy images that are profoundly challenging to a normative view of history: “whenever this dreamtime was, there was clearly no desire in it for hierarchy or control.” But she cannot find her way back to the cave next day: “These images would have revolutionised people’s views about the mental landscapes of the denizens of the past ... perhaps all that had happened was that a silly woman had simply imagined a teeming, sensuous playground ... That must have been it.”

In “The Vintage Suitcase” (vol. 4), Sarah finds a cache of lead soldiers, and re-stages some of the great battles of history. Somehow the original events get overturned, and Napoleon wins the Battle of Waterloo: “Did the vanquished always try to turn the tables? How could she live if the evidence of her own eyes contradicted that of the authorities?” Many of the stories invite the reader to interrogate received versions of the past and to take risks with the evidence which is habitually used. This is the case with “The Vindolanda Tablets” (vol. 5), which uses empathy as a means of picturing the historical as well as the personal past. The heroine receives mysterious missives on bark, just like those excavated from the Roman fort. They have been sent to her by her *alter ego*, “to test you, to tease you, to push you, to pinch you, to take away the muffle and the baffle, to life the veil.” In my most recent historical story, “The Heirloom” (vol. 6), I used the model of an aumbry (a type of cupboard) as a way of thinking about how innovation took place in the past. Some people are like a damaged aumbry: “men and women who were awkward and imperfect,

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prickly and ramshackle, rebarbative and unorthodox. The misfits. It is the misfits who change the world, and who were her kin.”

Every historical researcher has to present the reader with a sense of shock: that this was how things were, and this is how things changed. They have to foster an awareness of immediacy, and also process. They have to offer an explanation for the important transformations in consciousness. And that is what I tried to do in my stories too: to usher the reader into a bewildering world where you must question established evidence. There is always a sense of danger and risk in such an undertaking, and challenges, whether in the academic or fictional field, always engender discomfort. One way of making that bearable in fiction is to use humour, which you can rarely use in academic work.

### ASSIMILATIONS

It was part of my academic remit to think about the ways in which some films are culturally residual: that is to say, those which recycle well-known motifs of historical culture. This makes them ideologically central, but usually without status. When I wanted to think this through in fictional terms, it was clear that I had to allude to the central myths of the culture, but that I had to deal with them in an off-kilter way, if I wanted to avoid repetition and tedium. I had to use humour, extravagant allusiveness and surprise, in order to move my stories out of the “residual” category. Many of them revisit culturally secure motifs from folktales or fairy stories: “The Blue Shoes” (vol. 5) or “Rapunzel” (vol. 2), for example. There, the traditional themes are given an anarchic spin. “The Mysterious Lover” (vol. 1) deals with the familiar topic of the Demon Lover. But in this case, the heroine is not horrified: “actually, it felt quite comfortable ... As long as he didn’t make her do anything too awful, all might yet be well. Perhaps the Prince of Darkness was a gentleman.” And in “Autolykus” (vol. 5), the “picker-up of unconsidered trifles” gives the heroine a symbol which grants her access to the world of change. I wanted to use traditional residual motifs and breathe fresh life into them. And that means that you are *intervening* in the material of the culture, rather than mapping it.

All art is referential, and it is part of the researcher’s task to map the networks of influence. Creative writers must do that too, but they also have to challenge the canon in a way that researchers are not required to do. In “The Suburbs” (vol. 4), I reinterpreted *Winterreise* for a modern audience, making it into a verbal riff

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on ageing, death, and art. And in “The Voice” (vol. 3), I took the generally high-brow phenomenon of the counter-tenor repertoire. Christopher’s voice changes from a baritone to a counter-tenor: “suddenly it was as if his body was in a lift and had soared from the basement to the penthouse. A new voice came roaring out of his mouth ... high, piercing, female and strong.” Fearful of seeming effeminate, Christopher decides, in a moment of sublime camp, to perform the repertoire wearing full cowboy regalia.

Academic researchers have to make an explicit relationship with other writers in their field, and practising fiction writers have to come to a settlement with mainstream literary culture. In the stories, I tried to insert quotations from writers who have influenced me: Blake, Austen, and Shakespeare. But not just to quote them: to show where I came from. Conan Doyle is a dominant influence in mainstream and popular literature, and I have used him creatively as a source many times. But with an edge. In “Mrs Hudson’s Tale” (vol. 1), she realises that Holmes has syphilis, and treats a rash on his hand with her own tincture: “Every time I effect a minor cure in the long march of his illness, I’ll give my little triumph a name. This one will be called *The Speckled Hand*.” In “Irene Adler at the Reichenbach Falls” (vol. 2), I re-configured Professor Moriarty as Irene Adler in disguise: “‘Professor Moriarty, the day has come at last,’ said he. I took off my tall hat and laid it on the ground. I ruffled up my hair. I took off my jacket and the tight waistcoat. I pulled off my moustache. I undid my shirt and showed him my breasts. ‘Sherlock, it is I,’ I said. ‘I am Irene Adler.’ He came at me then. But whether it was out of fear or desire, I never knew.”

### GENDER SYMBOLISM

Another theme that ran throughout my academic work was that of stylised gender representation. I analysed the way in which sexual symbolism is inscribed within film texts, often in the decor, costume or hairstyles. At one time, it was fashionable to hunt for (and even to celebrate, in a muddle-headed Freudian manner) phallic symbols in art. But I wanted to argue that, in cultural texts aimed at women, it was reasonable to seek and find vaginal or vulval symbols. When I turned to fiction, I wanted to examine the ways in which gender difference could be dealt with on a non-literal level. When I first performed some of the stories live, I well recall the gasps of shock from the audience. I had wanted to be iconoclastic, but I should



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have been alert to the degree of challenge which the audience was prepared to accommodate. And of course, you do not want to give offence: or not too much. Sexuality (particularly the female kind) is a prime source of anxiety in cultural texts. What I wanted to do was to turn that anxiety into textual pleasure. Accordingly, in “Chocolate” (vol. 4), someone invents a chocolate bar that confers instant orgasm for women “without any stimulation by hand, tongue or penis ... you didn’t have to be polite to the chocolate. But you certainly had to be grateful to it.” The shop had long queues outside “with rather a lot of rosy women lolling against lamp-posts afterwards.” “The Growler” (vol. 1) is about a talking vagina which is so voluble that its owner has to resort to wearing stout knickers to muffle its cries, and “Moby Dick” (vol. 3) has a heroine who finds a 30-foot penis washed up on a beach. She decided that “it was indeed sad. She had expected to feel afraid of it. But curiosity was what she felt.” I tried to follow up this theme of sexual compassion with “The Viagra Chronicles” (vol. 6). In my most recent story on the topic, “Sheela-Na-Gig” (vol. 5), I wrote about the female gargoyles who display their own sexual parts, and I tried to lighten the tone by having the heroine give birth to something she wants for herself (a Pomeranian puppy) and to something that other people want from her (a Certificate of Total Emotional Commitment). These stories are more challenging than the interpretative writing on gender symbolism in the academic work, so I have tried to lighten the tone by humour and by avoiding descriptions of sexual trauma.

## THE NUMINOUS

I have produced some more speculative stories which have not arisen directly from my own academic concerns. These work with the idea of an earthly Utopia and the Numinous, and while these have been a rich seam in visual and literary culture, I have never mined it until now. Some stories imagine the heroines passing through a cataclysmic change, and they experience a heightened mode of perception which cannot be accounted for by common sense and the world of empirically-based facts. “The Gathering” (vol. 3) deals with a huge crowd drawn to Glen Coe to sing and is inspired by *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Stephen Spielberg, 1977). In “The Haar” (vol. 4), the heroine is engulfed by a life-changing fog at sea: this is taken from *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957). She finds a route to a new world in “The Bridge” (vol. 5), which makes visual quotations from *Lost*

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*Horizon* (Frank Capra, 1937). The same narrative structures “Beyond” (vol. 5), which takes images from Tenniell’s illustrations to *Alice in Wonderland*. The imagined utopias in the stories present a society that has dissolved the boundaries of racial and gender difference. And the boundaries between life and death too. “Endings” (vol. 6) takes its inspiration from Stanley Spencer’s painting, *Resurrection in Cookham* (1924–1927, Tate Gallery, London) and has the heroine devise a technique to arrest putrefaction: “And it worked. At first Sarah saw the fox draw breath, his red flanks rise and fall. The man and the woman stirred a little and struggled to sit up. The little birds, who had been reduced to bone and beak, began to sing. It had been a miracle, performed not by her but through her.” It was not part of my academic intention to imagine a new world, whether on a social or imaginative level: I had to interpret what I found. Fictional speculation is a different order of activity.

### CONCLUSION

I hope I have demonstrated that there can be a fruitful interchange between different creative methodologies, and that it can be an unpredictable and exciting one. But during that journey, what have I learned about what makes a good story? On the most simple level, it should involve change: of either the reader or the protagonist, and preferably both. It should have a clear structure: a beginning, a middle, and an end. It should issue from a secret though coherent mythology. It should be familiar enough not to alienate, and novel enough not to baffle.

Fictional work can transport the reader to a new world, whereas historical work can generate a new way of seeing. What I want to argue, with some passion, is that a movement into creative work should not always be seen as a *retreat* from the academic but can be a development of it. The mind maps are not necessarily different, and the cultural work required is just as hard. There is a role for the personal and the imaginative in academic writing and for an examination of the intersections between discursive frameworks in creative writing. Academic and fiction writers both require empathy, rigour, attention to detail, and the courage to address taboos. That is the highway to innovation, even if it is the road less travelled.

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### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sue Harper is Emeritus Professor of Film History at the University of Portsmouth. She has written many articles on British cinema, and on the culture/society interface, and has made many appearances on TV and radio. Her books include *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (1994), *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* (2000), *British Cinema of the 1950s: the Decline of Deference* (2003, with Vincent Porter), and *British Film Culture in the 1970s: the Boundaries of Pleasure* (2012, with Justin Smith). Since her retirement, she has concentrated on creative writing. Her first collection of short stories was published by Egaeus Press in 2020, and sold out quickly. Her website ([www.sueharper.co.uk](http://www.sueharper.co.uk)) contains all 200 stories (arranged in vols. 1–7) and includes some films to accompany them. She is currently completing her second collection of short stories, *The Sarah Chronicles: Transformation and Transcendence*.