

Unreliable Narration: The Exploration of a Technique to Destabilize Reliable
Narration in Prose, and, *I Am Tree*: a novel

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ABSTRACT

Unreliable Narration: The Exploration of a Technique to Destabilize Reliable Narration in Prose, and, *I Am Tree*: a novel

Humans are the only animals that attempt to make sense of their lived experiences by telling stories. We narrate so that we might understand the past and negotiate the future. But narrations are infinitely varied in content and form. Any inquiry into how humans construct stories is also an inquiry into reliable and unreliable narration; it is also an inquiry into the relationship between author, text and reader, and goes to the root of what it means to be human.

This thesis is comprised of two parts, a creative project and exegesis. The creative project, *I Am Tree*, is a series of interconnecting tales. A different narrator tells each tale, each speaks from a different period in time, but all have in common the place where their story is set. In the first tale, (that begins and ends the novel), fifteen-year-old Will Martin tells of his 1796 sailing trip along the south coast of New South Wales. In the last futuristic narration, a patient, Nada, (whose deceased human brain has been awakened and placed in a new body), is being membanked as part of the Yestermem project. Each narrator reports or misreports a violent incident and in each tale the landscape is ever changing and ever present.

The exegesis analyses the creative writing process by doing a close textual reading of one story as a case study, the interrogation in this instance

being of a text that is in the process of being written rather than an extant text. The research question investigates the ways unreliable narrations function as a destabilizing mechanism in prose and the research findings are applied to the narration techniques used in the novel, *I Am Tree*, submitted for examination. The research involved diverse approaches: theoretical, historical, and ecological research; field trips; interviews; and reading and researching the work of novelists. The theoretical approach was drawn from rhetorical and cognitive criticism with particular reference to James Phelan's theories (2005 & 2007) on rhetorical purpose and rhetorical ethics, and Vera Nünning (2004) and Bruno Zerweck's (2001) theorizing of historical and cultural positioning. The historical research investigates historical figures and exchanges between the First Australians and European colonizers.

This thesis argues that when creating historical unreliable narrators, and when the rhetorical purpose is to suggest multiple readings around a single historical event, then a certain amount of historical reliability is needed for the authorial audience to accept as credible the fictional interpretation of the historical figures and events depicted. The research indicates, however, that when approaching Indigenous historical narrators certain cultural protocols are required. My own nervousness about creating Indigenous narrators was eased through the research phase by my growing comprehension of the place story has in Indigenous culture. My conclusions, at the end of the study, suggest that unreliable narrations, by encouraging the reader to make judgments about narrator motivation, refute the idea that there is a single perspective on an event, reminding the authorial audience that counter-stories exist even if they are not being heard.

‘I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.’

Signed:

Catherine McKinnon

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