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REFLECTING ON HELL

A Reflective Essay on the novel *The Cause of Hell and Other Stories*

As part of the requirement for a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts by Research in Creatrive Writing. submitted to the Faculty of Arts, School of Literature, Language and Media, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I _____ (Student number: _____) am a student registered for _____ in the year _____.

I hereby declare the following:

I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.

I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.

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Signature: _____ Date: _____

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to four beloved people:

To my partner, Matthew, for helping me untangle that ball of wool.

To my friend, Michelle, for reading my first draft.

To my parents, Lyn and Vernon, for their love and support.

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INTRODUCTION

For this reflective essay, I went back to the first few drafts of my proposal for this project. While I had a number of intentions which have not made it through the final cut (like the textual apparatus of footnotes, italics, etc., which I talk about later on), there was one major thematic concern that has survived throughout: The major theme of my writing project was always going to be around identity, the game of self-identification and role-playing. This has remained so, but it has been played out a lot closer to home than I expected (or wanted). In my proposal, I had these ideas for dealing with the theme of identity in this project:

> Identity is a major theme throughout the novel, and is one of the principles organizing the connection between all the pieces. The narrator is driven […] to a) distinguish and save himself from the same fate as Fowler's nameless narrator, and b) make sense of his identity in his alienation. Thus, the roaming, nameless characters are essential to this theme. […] The mechanisms of nameless and roaming characters (my narrator, for one, and also many of the characters in Fowler's stories) will embody my project with the alienation, dislocation and disorientation essential to the search for identity.

As I read back on early pieces of writing, including the first few stories I wrote as well as drafts for the proposal and reflective essay, I am struck by the fact that out of all the characters involved in my project, it is me in my capacity as a writer for whom these concerns have been brought most dramatically to the fore during the completion of this MA. My conception of writing and of myself as a writer was challenged by the course, not by any one person in the group or a specific line of feedback, but by the writing process necessary to complete the degree. That writing process (or, more accurately, the non-writing of the majority of the course) was particularly hellish for me and so it is this aspect that I feel most deserves reflection.

THE WRITING PROCESS

During the first few meetings, the group discussed our intentions and how we planned to execute them during the next two years. My fear was that while others around me were presenting proposals with (it seemed to me) fully-fledged ideas and clear methods for executing them, I didn't have the first idea of what I was going to write about. Whatever I picked now was what I had to work on for the next two years.

My initial intention when applying to the course had been to write a collection of short stories that explored communication between characters using textual apparatus (like italics, footnotes, endnotes, parenthesis and a number of other devices) to bridge the gaps between what was said and what went unsaid. I was entranced by these mechanisms and wanted to play around with them, but when it actually came down to writing the stories in which these mechanisms would be deployed, I had nothing. This brought me great distress and I started to feel lost before anything had even begun.

"Don't worry,' the supervisors told us, "We expect your projects to change as you work on them. It's natural." My classmates and I turned to the initial proposals we had put forward when applying to the course and worked from there. Most kept theirs the same, but a few did a complete about-face, including me. The supervisors' words ringing in my ears, I thought, well, why did I have to cling onto some unsubstantial idea I'd had (one that didn't excite me at all), when a million more were knocking around in my head? In the first couple of weeks I managed to put together an idea for something I thought I might like to write.

My project of fiction would be a collection of standalone short stories and pieces which could be read together to tell an overarching narrative — that of the narrator (who remains nameless throughout the collection up until the very end) and his savant girlfriend, Kitty, on their journey in researching the life, disappearance and death of the poet and writer, John Fowler. When it came time to submit final proposals for our projects, I had a clear idea of my characters and what, in general, my book would be about. I didn't realise that the easy part was over and that the writing process would challenge me in ways I had not been challenged before.

MODUS OPERANDI

Before this MA (and even well into it, truthfully), my approach to writing was much like that of my narrator's; it was manic, frenetic and unpredictable. I was not the slow, methodical worker that John Fowler, the invisible artist in my story was, though like my narrator, I longed to be. I went through long periods without writing anything and then, quite suddenly, I would find myself in the lounge at three in the morning, a whiskey glass teetering on the couch armrest and a cigarette dangling out of my mouth, and a line would come to me. I would write the line down and then another would come, and on it went in a frenzy like this until the box of cigarettes was finished and the keyboard was a blur and somehow I'd written a fifteen page story that if not good, was at least not bad. I gambled that at some point the unpredictable surge of inspiration would strike.

In my Honours year of university I took a course in creative writing which I loved. I found that the writing deadlines imposed by the course were just pressing enough to get me to work a little more consistently than I would otherwise, but not serious enough that I lose sleep over it. I entered the MA with much the same expectations. In the first few seminars we were told that, besides a clear and structured proposal, we would be required to submit new creative pieces to the group at least every month.

I knew before beginning the course that I would have to work a bit differently than was used to, but I assumed this change would be incited in me by the monthly submission deadlines as I have always considered myself someone who works well under pressure. Besides these expectations, I also entered the course with my own romanticised notions of what it would be like to work a full time job and write a novel at the same time. I imagined myself waking two or three hours before work in order to sit down to write on my typewriter, and scribbling chapters on spare pieces of notepaper during my lunch break, then coming home to collate all the scraps and transfer them into print. I imagined myself working well into the night while my partner slept, and then waking up to do it all over again.

I took a passive stance from the outset of this course and in terms of reaping the benefits of the course, the experienced supervisors, and the other creatives around me; this approach has served me badly. I stood back and waited for the pressure of a submission deadline to force me to work — subconsciously, I think, waiting for that 'creative surge' to strike as it had seemed to serve me well in the past — and this resulted in a withdrawal from the group and from my project.

CONCEPTION OF SELF AS A WRITER CHALLENGED

At some point during my undergraduate years, I had to write an essay on Ivan Vladislavic's *Portrait with Keys*. Here was another instance in which I simply trusted that an outburst of productivity would strike at just the right time and see me through a task. It was the night before the essay was due and I hadn't written a word. I hadn't read the book either.

There I sat, staring at the blank page before me with nothing to draw on but my blank mind, and what came to mind was Roberto Bolano's *The Savage Detectives* (2007). Although the book's middle section makes up most of the narrative, what I thought of was the first and last sections, narrated by the seventeen year-old Juan Garcia Madero. Juan wanted to study literature, but was forced by his guardians to study law instead (6). He agreed to it, though soon took up with a group of radical poets who called themselves "The Visceral Realists." The

Visceral Realists were promiscuous lovers of literature who would meet for long hours at a local restaurant called Café Quito where they would drink and smoke and discuss literature and poetry, getting into heated discussions about the future of Mexican writing and who amongst them or which group of writers was best for moving the Mexican literary scene forwards. Juan became entranced by this group (as I did) and their passional consumption of everything relating to literature — including books and people — and he dropped out of law school and devoted himself to literature. He read every book and poem recommend to him by his Visceral Realist colleagues, spent sleepless nights writing and editing his poetry and worked hard to read every supplemental text he could that would increase his literary knowledge and prowess. He not only wanted to become as good a poet as he could, as good as or better than the other infamous poets in the group (like Ulysses Lima and Arturo Belano, the latter being Roberto Bolano's literary alter ego), he also wanted to have more literary knowledge than anyone else, be able to draw on countless texts and interpretations and rattle off insightful analyses at the drop of a hat.

In that moment, as I sat before a pressing deadline with nothing to show and all the world of books to read but none of the inclination to do so, I couldn't help compare myself to Juan Garcia Madero. Here was Juan, desperate to study and create literature, making use of every tool in his arsenal to do just that. He went weeks without sleeping simply because the only time for him to read or write was at night after he had returned from law school and had finished his university assignments. As I write this, Ray Bradbury comes to mind in a similar way. I have read little of Bradbury's work but it was not his writing that stood out to me, it was his personal story as a writer. Bradbury's access to education was limited, so he taught himself in public libraries and took any opportunity to write, apparently penning most of a novel on butcher paper at age eleven when he was forced to work during the Great Depression. Bradbury, like Madero, was an artist starved of avenues through which to express his art and yet this did not stop him from writing, either.

I sat there thinking about Juan Garcia Madero and Ray Bradbury and their commitment to literature at any cost even when all the structures in their lives made it hard or near-impossible for them to pursue it freely. I wondered whether there was some inherent quality missing in me that these other writers had — that thing that made them go sleepless for weeks, writing and reading like their lives depended on it. They really seemed to toil and strive for their art. Did this mean, I wondered, that despite my ability to write a good sentence in a pinch, I didn't have the makings of a real writer?

These patterns and concerns resurfaced during the writing of my MA, but took new forms. Before, the fear that I was not made of writing stock was a slightly abstracted, disembodied one but once the proposal had been submitted and the pressure to write was on, this fear became intertwined with the struggles I was having actually writing the novel. The major struggle was constructing the overall narrative which would be told across the standalone short stories.

I'd had no problem writing short stories in which David and Kitty featured vividly, even somehow managing to weave David's the obsession with and fear of Fowler in neatly, but the stories were disconnected from each other and every time I wrote I felt I was moving further away from resolving the overall narrative. Despite my anxiety about this, no one in the class seemed to notice that I was having trouble. Classmates and supervisors seemed impressed with each instalment and expressed anticipation for the next. My anxiety continued to grow, however, as the course progressed and classmates were beginning to finish off their first drafts. My fear was compounded as I considered the implications of not being able to generate this overarching narrative — would this mean I would not be able to finish my creative project? Did it mean that I would not achieve my Master's? Did that, in turn, mean that I was certainly not a real writer?

These fears plagued me from the start to finish of this MA. One of the greatest consequences of buckling to these fears was that I created a dragon out of my project and I let it grow so big as to consume me.

CREATING A DRAGON

In Jack Kent's children's book, *There's No Such Thing as a Dragon* (1975), Billy Bixby wakes up one morning to find a small dragon sitting at the end of his bed and he can't wait to tell his mother. His mother, being one who does not like to acknowledge uncomfortable truths even when they are staring her in the face, looks over the dragon's head and tells her son that "there's no such thing as dragons.*"* When she says that, the dragon doubles in size. Throughout the rest of the day, Billy follows his mother's lead and pretends that the dragon does not exist even though Billy's mother has to step over it to get to the fridge; by the time Billy's father gets home from work, the dragon is wearing the house like a backpack. Eventually, with their house in ruins and no way to pretend any longer, Billy's mother concedes the dragon's existence. When Billy pats the dragon on the head, it shrinks to the size of a kitten.

Like Billy's mother, it became easier (in the beginning) to simply withdraw from the class and the project. I did not think about my project until two or three days before I was due to submit to the class, thereby reverting to my tendency to use the pressure of a deadline as incentive to complete a task. These writing periods did little to alleviate my anxiety since I was not concerned with developing the project, only with meeting the submission requirements for that particular seminar. Once my submission was complete, I would not think about it again until the next time I had to present something. In this way my project became my dragon, growing larger and insurmountable the longer I ignored it.

What resulted from this was a constant remaking of my project. I didn't know what exactly I was writing and so every time I sat down to write, I wrote something different. David has gone from a ghost writer to wealthy financial consultant to working at a fish shop, his name has changed countless times, alternating between named and nameless; Kitty has gone from 30 to 18 to 25 years old, from asexual, straight-laced and sober child-woman to at-times libidinous and petulant and back again; Fowler has gone from poet to prose writer and back countless times and, incredibly, despite all this writing, a plot had yet to develop.

FEAR OF THE FAKER

I wrote good characters and vivid scenes and I think, for a while, this worked to distract my classmates from the fact that my narrative wasn't really going anywhere. While my supervisor assured me that, despite my concerns over this lack of development, my cohort nonetheless found my submissions compelling, that didn't seem, in my view, to be the point any more. While in the beginning the reward of positive feedback was enough to ward off the dragon of the moment, to alleviate any fears I'd had of not being considered a good enough writer, the time soon came when classmates began finishing off second drafts of their work and I still did not have one. Despite this irksome thought in the pit of my stomach, I lapped up the praise and pushed my concerns aside. I chose to take the positive feedback as good indication that I came off as a talented writer which, it seems to me now, was more important to me than actually writing.

More than having an incomplete project, my fear was that I would be 'outed' as struggling with my writing when those around me, including my supervisor, seemed under the impression that I was progressing easily. I did not ask for help when I needed it for fear of 'outing' myself as a complete amateur. But this was hardly a secret, all of us in the course were

amateurs and getting help from seasoned writers and literary academics to improve our craft was precisely the reason we were there. I became doubly frustrated then, with the fact that I seemed unable to write or think about my project at all, and with the fact that I had clearly done such a good job of fooling everyone into thinking I had the project under control that even my assigned supervisor did not think to reach out to me. After class one day my supervisor said to me; "You're so independent and autonomous, such a talented writer, *you* should be supervising *me*!" I nodded and smiled and said thank you, but truthfully I felt exactly as I had that night, many years ago, sitting in front of a blank computer screen with a deadline only hours away. Eventually I did reach out to my supervisor in a desperate email in which I let her know that I was struggling and needed supervision. As I expected, she was surprised to hear I was having a hard time. It was then that I realised how difficult I had really made this whole process — and that was before the bad feedback started coming in.

BAD FEEDBACK

I often came away from seminars at which I had presented feeling like the class 'didn't get' what I was writing or what I was trying to do. And while that is true, it is not because of any comprehension shortcomings on their part, it is because I didn't know what I was writing about or what I was trying to do. I didn't give the class the material to feedback to and the feedback soon began to mirror the uncertainty of my writing:

"It seems as though every time you submit a piece, the narrator has a different name, is a different age. And it's the same with Kitty. I think you need to nail down some of these fundamental details so that you can just get on with the writing now," was what one of the supervisors said to me. Another agreed and said: "don't let thoughts of where you think my story should go stop you from following whether the characters take you." And one classmate simply said, "I'm confused now. I'm not sure what's going on. Have I missed a submission or something?" I had created a situation in which it became impossible for the group to give me meaningful and useful feedback.

THE RED HERRING

It was sometime towards the end of the second year and I still had no cohesive project. My panic mounted exponentially with every passing day and came to a head at the point at which we were supposed to be presenting the first drafts of our reflective essays. No one, including

myself, knew what my project was about anymore and yet, somehow, I had to begin reflecting on it. It was unavoidable now: I had to knuckle down and do some work.

I heeded the words of the supervisor who had said that I should spend some time trying to figure out the fundamentals of my story, so that I wouldn't have to invent them anew every time I sat down to write. I took a few days' leave from work, and set myself the goal of setting a structure to my narrative. I would then be able to flesh out with the writing I had already done.

I did a lot of research on the 'detective' genre and found some very useful tools online for crafting mystery stories ("How to Write a Detective Story," 2008; Gavin, 2016; Chesterton, 1925). While I had never intended my project to be a true 'mystery' there were some mystery elements that I wanted to incorporate: the story was, after all, about Kitty and David in search of information about the writer John Fowler. For that, I reasoned, they would have to do some sleuthing. I spent time crafting the details of 'the crime' (here rather the event of Fowler's disappearance and suicide), 'the investigator' (here the investigative team of David and Kitty), 'the suspects' (here, a host of characters that would appear throughout the book as seeming suspiciously close to the event of Fowler's death, like Linda Liebermann, Florence Fowler and Dorothy O'Neil), and 'the investigative motive' (the reason, besides concerns for the law/justice as would be expected with a police officer character, that the investigator/investigative team is interested in solving the mystery). Using these tools, I spent the next while taking every thing I had written and beating it into shape to fit this newly developed structure. In doing so I decided to do away with the short story structure and moved towards the classic novel — I began writing consecutive chapters that. While it did not always feel natural or right to rip my writing out of its original form and shove it into this new one, it did feel good to be making some measurable progress. At least now, I felt, I had something solid to reflect on in the essay.

In the first draft of my essay, I reflected over two major points during my writing process: the first was that I was worried that I had not done enough work and would not be ready to submit. The second was the discovery of the detective thread and the guidance it had given me in finally being able to develop some trajectory for the overarching narrative.

In an effort to be supportive and (I think) because she genuinely had no idea of exactly how far behind I was, one of the supervisors responded to the first point and said: "But is there really any time wasted? Is any time put towards writing wasted, even if it is just reading a book or going for a swim or staring at the sky?" "Yes!" was what I wanted to scream, but I couldn't for fear, even then, that I would out myself. Thankfully one of the other supervisors answered

for me. “Yes,” he said. “Unfortunately people do find that the time they have spent trying to get something to work was in vain, and that the project has to be scrapped altogether, or at least deployed differently, at a different time.” This was certainly the case for me, although there would never be a different time to deploy this project: the submission deadline was five months away and I didn’t have the resources to sign up for another year.

In response to the second point, the same supervisor who had said that there *is* such a thing as time wasted, also warned me about the possibility of the detective thread being a red herring. This I found amusing at first, since the introduction of a red herring into the mystery story was one of the tips I had discovered. Once the joke wore off, I could see what he meant. I became certain I had wasted my precious time trying to force my writing down a pointless and misleading path.

The supervisor who had asked if there was any such thing as wasted time then told me to “stop remaking the thing and let the pieces fall where they may.” This infuriated me. After all, it wasn’t as if the pieces were falling very easily to begin with. Eventually, after enough time spent bashing my writing to make it fit into the detective template I had created, I realised that it simply wasn’t going to work. I don’t know why or how I felt this, but I arrived at a juncture one day when I could see that no matter how much bashing I did, it would simply not bend. I sat aghast at my computer. I heard ‘red herring’ and ‘remaking the thing’ and ‘the work was in vain’ echoing round my head for days.

My supervisor tried to assure me that my talent was evident and that I only need trust it a little. “But I’m not having a writerly-identity crisis,” I told her. “I’m having a student-who-is-having-to-make-up-two-years’-worth-of-work-in-a-few-months crisis.” The truth, though I didn’t know it at the time, was that I was having both crises simultaneously, but the only way I was going to deal with either of them was if I simply started writing.

THE WRITING

> Being in the mood to write, like being in the mood to make love, is a luxury that isn't necessary in a long-term relationship. Just as the first caress can lead to a change of heart, the first sentence, however tentative and awkward, can lead to a desire to go just a little further.
>
> **—** Julia Cameron**,** *The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation Into the Writing Life*.

For the second time I came to the realisation that I would have to knuckle down and simply write. I took a total of about two months leave from work and I got down to writing like it was my day job. Once I started, I quickly realised what my major flaw had been. All this time I had been waiting for a bell to ring and tell me "Yes! This is the right direction — stick with this!" Slowly, perhaps too late but possibly just in time — I realised that this moment may never come. I might never be in the mood to write. Inspiration might never strike. Creativity may be on an indefinite hiatus. If I kept waiting for inspiration to strike then I would simply continue as I had been going — remaking my project every time I had to write a new sentence. So, I did what all the supervisors had urged us to do when we felt lost or disoriented: Go back to the beginning — to the proposal, in which ideas and intentions were crisp and clear — and work from there. That is what I did. I felt that familiar sense of intuition that the project needed to be remade at least one more time, in its original form. I (painfully, without joy) completely scrapped the detective thread that I had worked so long and hard on, and I returned to my original structure; I went back to the short stories and the emotional and psychological fascination with Fowler.

At this point, my fiancé and I had moved to a cottage in an estate which overlooked roaming farmlands. Glass doors spanned the entire length of the cottage and could be opened up so as to blur the distinction between inside and outside, bringing the great immensity within. Sitting at the dining room table, I looked out onto the neatly tilled fields and the hills beyond, dotted with trees and bushes and watched the mist rolling in over the hilltops, slowly making its way towards me. In the fields just outside the cottage, herds of cows would often come to graze and the farmer's horses would come to trim the long grass along the fence. It seemed the perfect place to sit down with my writing and try to make sense of it. Feeling the time pressure starting to mount, even I knew that my days of cooking three course meals in order to procrastinate were over. If I was going to make this deadline I needed to knuckle down. I stocked up on frozen meals and told my fiancé that he would have to start doing the laundry. Ignoring the dejected look on his face (he desperately wanted to be helpful but he felt very hard done by about the laundry thing), I got to work.

At first I was worried about where I would get enough content to create all the stories I needed, since I had the feeling that I had not been writing forwards, but in circles. It turned out that I had a lot of content to work with and that somehow in the last two years I had managed to starve myself of that credit. That concern soon fell away as I faced off with this enormous mess of writing that I somehow had to hammer *back* into shape. There were a number of chapters which were basically just the same scenes written in different ways, but then there

were also half-scenes, half-chapters, random sentences here and there, sticky notes taped to the inside of a journal, pictures on my camera I had taken of notes I'd made on restaurant napkins, thoughts I had emailed to myself and sent to friends for their opinions. I don't think I could properly remember all the places that bits of my novel may have been stored and even now I think I am still missing a few pieces — my novel's 'diaspora' as I like to think of them.

I sat with an overabundance of meat but no idea how to string it together. I felt the fears and concerns that had arisen during the first few months of the course returning — I wanted to write stories which could stand as individual pieces but when read together would form a greater narrative, but how would I do this? I felt then very similarly to the way I had a few years ago, when I'd walked into the lounge to find that my new puppy had gotten into my wool basket. The place looked like a haberdashery massacre. Balls of wool were all over, strung out and tangled up in each other, couch cushions had been pulled in and tied up like hostages in an acrylic wool web. I couldn't tell one ball from another. There was too much to be done to fix this mess. Rather than trying to sort it out I felt like throwing it all away, simply brushing it all up into a black bag and dumping it out on the side of the road. But what a waste. I was about a quarter of the way through my quilt and this was all the material I had left and I needed it all. I had a frustrated cry, but then sat down on the couch, picked up the nearest ball of wool and began to pull at a strand. My fiancé came into find me and without saying a word he sat down and picked up a handful of wool as well. After a few hours, the wool was mostly untangled and had been balled back up into the correct colours. Of course we had to take scissors to some of the strands, trimming here and there as they would not come loose no matter how hard we pried and some balls could not be salvaged at all and had to be thrown away entirely. But still, by the end of that evening my wool basket was once again packed neatly with individual balls and, feeling lighter, I was able to envisage how I would turn the wool into squares which I would then sew together to make my blanket.

Just as I had pulled on one strand of wool at a time, I decided to take the same approach to my writing. I went through it piece by piece, shaping and moulding as I went. If, while working on a particular story, I tugged on a strand which seemed to move something in different piece, I focused on that one and followed the strand for as far is it went. If I had to snip it, I snipped it. If it was a particularly gruesome knot but I needed the strands intact, I spent as long as I needed to on it, gently undoing it and trying to keep from getting frustrated. The more I worked, the more the stories took shape and fell into a natural structure and the less overwhelmed and helpless I felt. I had no bursts of mad genius to hide behind, only the continuous plodding through the sludge of words. In every moment of frustration I reminded

myself, "one foot at a time, one word at a time." As E.L Doctorow would say of this process: "Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

OUTCOMES

I managed to accomplish two years' of creative writing in the space of six months. This becomes less impressive when I consider the fact that plenty of authors have written novels in that time or less (Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Graham Green's *The Confidential Agent* were all written in under a month ("10 Novels Written in About a Month"), but I was still pretty pleased. With the creative portion under my belt I could finally begin reflecting on the two years and the project that had emerged. While I have shared my reflections on the process of non-writing that characterised the vast majority of my experience of the course, it is the outcomes of the actual writing I did and the project which took shape to which I now turn. Interestingly, despite the endless mutations, my work has ended up looking very similar to the initial intentions and objectives I started the course with.

GENRE/FORM

My intention from the beginning was to tell a longer, more sustained narrative but I loved the short story form and so I wanted to find a way to do both. I wanted the stories to be able to stand alone — allowing a reader to read any story without needing to know what came before — but when read together would work together to tell an overarching narrative. I worried that I was trying to invent something completely new by doing this and so I was relieved to discover that this genre already existed:

> *The composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that— though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles.* – (Dunn and Morris, 1995: xiii)

Although my work mutated and took many different forms throughout the MA as I struggled with writing the story (which I discuss in the Writing Process) — at one point even scrapping the idea of the short stories and trying to focus on a more classical novel form — this has remained and I feel confident returning to my initial classification of my work as a composite

novel. The organising principle, around which my stories pivoted, is my narrator's growing obsession with the poet and writer, John Fowler.

CHARACTERS

Interestingly, my characters emerged first and they led the plot. As Ray Bradbury says, "Plot is no more than footprints left in the snow after your characters have run by on their way to incredible destinations" (Zen in the Art of Writing).

NAMELESS PROTAGONIST/NARRATOR/DAVID SIMMS

A number of years ago, before I started this MA in Creative Writing, I bought Bukowski's book, *Women*. I didn't finish it but the book has a strong aftertaste. I found Bukowski's protagonist, Henry Chinaski (Bukowski's recurrent alter ego), to be disgusting and intriguing, I was torn between repulsion and attraction and he formed the very loose basis for my narrator. As a result, my narrator, whose name is David Simms but whom remains nameless up until the end of the novel (this namelessness is dealt with in the Major Themes sections) is, like Chinaski, a selfish, lecherous and lascivious man who can attribute most of his successes (literary and otherwise) to the help and interest paid to him by the members of the literary elite, most of whom were women. Unlike Chinaski, who becomes a writer later in life, David does not enjoy much success as his writing career ends shortly after it begins. Thus David starts out as a failed writer and his goal becomes to discover the reasons for his failure. He attributes responsibility for his failure to the dead writer, John Fowler, with whom he feels an affinity.

KITTY LIEBERMANN

Similarly, Kitty Liebermann arises out of two female characters: Kitty Wu in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* and Lydia Vance in Bukowksi's *Women*. In Auster's book, Kitty is a fiercely logical and dispassionate woman, while Lydia Vance in *Women* is a libidinous artist prone to fits of violence, jealousy and volatility. Out of these two grew my Kitty Liebermann who has been with me long since before the course started.

I had tried a few times to deploy her into various stories, but she never quite fit. My previous stories were square, circular and triangular holes and Kitty was a very oddly shaped peg. The story into which she'd fit, I knew, would reveal itself to me, and all I could do was wait for that to happen. And it did. David needed a (semi) sensible Watson to compliment his debauched Sherlock Holmes, although in my book, Kitty is the brilliant puzzle-solver and

David is more of a helpless idiot who can't seem to get his life together enough to solve his own problems. She was no good at a dinner party but had a photographic memory and penchant for piecing together seemingly disparate pieces and an ability to see a cohesive whole where others might only see a mess, as was the case with David.

JOHN FOWLER

John Fowler is the author of the fictional book, *The Cause of Hell*. After experiencing mediocre success as a poet, Fowler's mother becomes ill and he moves back to Upington to care for her. He is not heard from again for sixteen years — when he commits suicide. During this time he had been working on *The Cause of Hell*, a six-hundred page rumination on an unnamed man's death (again, this namelessness is dealt with in the Major Themes section), told from the perspective of those attending his funeral. Although a major character in the novel, Fowler remains invisible throughout, rendered only when David reflects on *The Cause of Hell* or others who knew him reflect on the man. Greater insight into David's character is provided in this way, as the two men's lives (and the themes in Fowler's books) parallel each other as David seeks to define himself by defining Fowler.

PLOT/STRUCTURE

As I mentioned earlier, the characters developed first and I expected the plot to follow soon after. I had three strong characters whose motivations and ties with each other were clear, and it was plain to see what the overall story would be: David develops obsession with dead writer and is joined by his peculiar girlfriend in his quest to discover more information about him. I got it down in writing in the proposal and I was confident I would be able to write this. While my certainty of my characters never dwindled, I struggled enormously with actually crafting the plot of David and Kitty's search for Fowler. I explore this difficulty in the section on the Writing Process. Once I had finished the creative portion, I was interested to discover how the plot had changed and developed as I let the story run its natural course.

Initially, I imagined that the book would be divided into two parts, the first part consisting of three chapters which would outline David and Kitty meeting, the establishment of David's obsession with Fowler, and David and Kitty going on to work together to research the writer's life and disappearance. The second part I intended to be divided into chapters, some of which would be standalone short stories and diary entries that would be attributed to John Fowler, and other chapters narrated by David as he details certain parts of his journey in researching

Fowler. Additionally, I imagined that David would intrude into the Fowler stories and diary entries (through the use of italics and footnotes) to offer opinion on Fowler's writing and contextualise, based on David's findings, some of the writer's diary entries. However, once I began to write the characters and, more importantly, once I began to follow where they would lead me, the plot changed. I did incorporate some version of this intention, however, as excerpts from Fowler's book are provided in David's narrative. David reflects on these passages via internal dialogue and conversations with others, but I did not opt for the extra-textual devices of footnotes and italics. I have come to think that perhaps this way of doing it is more apt for my project as it illustrates the way that Fowler continuously intruded in David's life.

Interestingly enough, after having developed a vague conceptualisation of David and his obsession with Fowler, and of Fowler's disappearance, I read Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions* (2002). In Auster's book, a man loses his entire family and copes with the loss by obsessing over the work and life of the silent film actor, Hector Mann, who disappeared without a trace shortly after his career began to take off. I hadn't read this book before starting the MA and so the coincidental similarities struck me. I credit this book, largely, for having given me a guideline for developing a story around a depressed man's obsession with a fictional artist — something I had been struggling with terribly. As T.S Eliot said in his critical essay on the playwright, Philip Massinger, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different" (Eliot [1921] 2000). I hope, if what has come of this inspiration is not good, then at least it is different. The resultant structure and the plot of the novel are outlined below.

DEVELOPMENT OF OBSESSION

What emerged as I struggled to find the story of David and Kitty in search of Fowler, was the way in which David's obsession first began to manifest. Thus emerged "The Poet of Pigeon Valley," a story about how the seventeen year-old David won the prize which led to his short-lived writing fame and how integral his finding of Fowler's novel had been in achieving this. While at first I was concerned about how this story would fit into the original plot I had envisioned — since, in this fictional timeline, the events in "The Poet of Pigeon Valley" would have taken place some sixteen years before my original start-point for the story — I no longer had the time to worry about whether something would or wouldn't work. I didn't want what work I had to done to have been in vain and so I trusted in my characters to guide the way forward.

Out of the "Poet of Pigeon Valley" grew the subsequent stories, "Straight off the Deal" and "Little Bridle," which dealt with David's progression from successful to failed writer. As he became more and more angry and disillusioned, Fowler and his impact on David's life loomed steadily larger until David feels there is no one to blame for his shortcomings but Fowler himself.

NARRATIVE INTERRUPTED

David's narrative (and the overarching narrative of his developing obsession with Fowler) is disrupted by three pieces: the "Foreword" which begins the book, the story "Linda" which appears halfway through the novel and "Funeral" which closes the book. I intentionally disrupted this overarching narrative in order to structurally reflect a major feature of the writing which was the endless intertwining of lives — now not just David's and Fowler's, but Kitty's, Linda's, Florence's and Dot's, too.

"Linda" is written by the protagonist, David Simms and chronicles Linda Liebermann's (Kitty's mother) rise to literary elitism. One of this story's major themes is role-playing: In an effort to find a place for herself in her world Linda tries on the roles of doting wife to her new husband, and free-thinking creative after meeting Bernie. While this story is about Linda, it is simultaneously a story about Kitty's beginnings. Like David in "The Poet of Pigeon Valley," "Linda" is an origins story for both Linda and Kitty.

The book starts with the "Foreword" to John Fowler's novel, *The Cause of Hell*, written by Linda Liebermann in 1970, and ends with another piece written by David Simms entitled, "Funeral." Like "Linda," "Funeral" is intended to drive home the idea of the infinitely intertwined lives of the characters, including now also Fowler's wife, Florence. "Funeral" tells the story of Fowler's own funeral from the varying perspectives of the funeral attendants. By writing this story in this way, David pays homage to Fowler's *The Cause of Hell* which chronicles the suicide of a man in a similar way.

Thus, David's personal journey is informed not only by his relationship with the writer and with Kitty, but also by Linda Liebermann's and Florence Fowler's relationship with Fowler. The structure of the novel, then, is intended as an 'infinite loop' to reflect this entanglement: The novel begins with the publication of Fowler's book (Linda Liebermann's "Foreword") and ends with Fowler's death ("Funeral"), after which (in the story of Fowler's life), his book is posthumously published by Linda Liebermann.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

After the story "Linda," the overarching narrative resumes with the stories "Kitty," "No Horse in the Race" and "Upington." In "Kitty," David begins active research on Fowler and in the process — while trying to investigate Linda Liebermann — meets Kitty. Their relationship begins soon after they meet and it is not long, either, until Kitty becomes more intent on Fowler than David. It is Kitty's action-oriented personality which begins to drive the narrative forwards. Importantly, "Kitty" follows "Linda" and so by the time Kitty is introduced, the reader already has a fairly clear picture of where she comes from in her own life narrative. The same is true for the reader's perception of Linda Liebermann which, by the time Linda appears in "Kitty," is already informed by Linda's behaviour in "Linda."

In "No Horse in the Race," the beginnings of David's frustrations begin to show as he feels displaced in his own narrative by Kitty who takes the reigns in the search for Fowler. The story ends on a somewhat hopeless note as David reads Fowler's and his own writing side-by-side and feels as though his attempts to find Fowler and derive meaning from those findings are, ultimately, just as futile as his own attempts to be a writer.

Although these stories can stand alone, "Upington" becomes a powerful continuation of the feelings in "No Horse in the Race" as David has forbidden any more talk of Fowler. In attempts to escape the feelings of overwhelming futility, David decides to withdraw from the search altogether. The irony of this sentiment working its way into my final narrative does not escape me and I am acutely aware of the way in which my processes during the course seem to have informed my story. As it did for me and my project, Fowler the dragon grew larger and more pressing the longer David ignored it and, eventually, he was forced to acknowledge the presence of this unavoidable thing in order to move on with his life. David then agrees to give the search for Fowler one more shot and accompanies Kitty to Upington to speak to Florence who has initiated some contact with them. There, they speak to various people — never quite receiving the full story from anyone — and are able to piece together what they think happened to John Fowler. While the mystery of the mechanics of his disappearance and suicide seems to be solved, the question underlying all of David's anxiety — why Fowler decided to take his own life — is never answered and the two investigators return to Johannesburg with, it feels to David, only one part of the picture filled in, but feeling positive, nonetheless, that he can at last begin to conceive of himself as an individual with a place in the world and whose fate is no longer tied to Fowler. This is expressed saliently in the last paragraph as, for the first time in

the entire book (besides the by-lines of David's inserted stories) someone refers to David by his name.

The ending of my novel thus raised two points which I identified after completing it: the first being the connection between name, identity and a feeling of belonging; the second being an unwitting pairing of stories which further amplified the entanglement of lives that I had hoped to convey through the disrupted narrative. These points are discussed in the Major Themes section and below, respectively.

AN UNWITTING PAIRING

Unbeknownst to me, as I wrote and slowly figured out how I wanted all of my writing to sit together, it became apparent that my stories seemed to be pairing off naturally. Starting at the beginning and end and then working in towards the middle of the book, I noticed the following pairings beginning to emerge:

"FOREWORD" AND "FUNERAL"

As I mentioned above, these stories work together as an infinite loop indicating the entanglement of lives. Additionally, these stories seemed to deal with the implications of Fowler's death on the two women, Linda Liebermann and Florence Fowler. In "Foreword" it is clear that Fowler's death benefitted Linda Liebermann a great deal as she was able to then publish his novel amidst an air of intrigue. In "Funeral," Florence, unlike Linda who benefits from it, suffers a vital loss as a result of his death.

"THE POET OF PIGEON VALLEY" AND "UPINGTON"

These stories pair off in that they represent the incline and decline of the narrative arc. In "The Poet of Pigeon Valley" David's writing career begins and he travels to Johannesburg towards, unbeknownst to him, his future obsession with Fowler and his downfall as a writer. In "Upington," David returns to Johannesburg, away from his obsession with Fowler and, it is suggested, may begin to conceive of himself as something other than simply a writer or a failed writer.

"STRAIGHT OFF THE DEAL" AND "NO HORSE IN THE RACE"

In these two stories, David's respective burgeoning and lessening obsessions with Fowler are paired. In "Straight off the Deal" David's romantic notions of the writer's life (again, this irony

does not escape me) are beginning to be offset by the reality of his squandered literary opportunities and the idea that there may be more to becoming a successful writer than simply playing one. His obsession with Fowler starts to creep in at this point as a mechanism through which attempts to take control of his life. In "No Horse in the Race," however, David begins to feel out of control of the game he started (for Kitty finding Fowler is a game but for David it is life and death) and so he starts trying to phase Fowler out of this thoughts while simultaneously creating a dragon out of the man.

"LINDA" AND "KITTY"

These two stories made the most sense as a pair. In "Linda," Linda is introduced as a burgeoning young agent on the literary scene and some insight is provided into Kitty's character as a result of her developmental environment. In "Kitty," Kitty is formally introduced and becomes an agent in her own right, defying her mother and playing a vital role in the progression of the narrative.

NARRATION

Based on my initial conceptions of the project I had intended a first-person narration in both David's story and in the included Fowler pieces. This I intended in order to further intertwine the two men's lives. While I have done away with the Fowler pieces (besides, of course, the passages of his book that are included in David's narrative as he reflects on them), David's story remains in first-person narration. As such, he is a conscious but imperfect or unreliable narrator, as his narration is largely directed by a psychologically unstable state and is entirely subjective as he attributes so much meaning to the internal story for direction in his life.

The thing that has changed, however, has been the stories written by David are narrated in the third-person. This style of narration emerged organically as I wrote and seems to benefit the structure of the book. Theoretically, David writes these stories well after the events of the over-arching narrative have taken place — i.e., after he has returned from Upington and had time to reflect on all that has happened. By narrating "Linda" and "Funeral" in the third-person I felt three things were achieved: The first was that David honours his promise to Florence to write about what he learns in "Upington." The second was that David as a fictional author, with his own narrative style, alongside Fowler in the book was established. The third was that an unintentional trick is played on the narrator: even in these seemingly objective stories, David's

own unreliability as a narrator still influences readings of Linda and Kitty, as well as Florence and Fowler.

MAJOR THEMES

Once the creative portion was complete and I began working on the numerous drafts of this reflective essay I started to see some themes emerging in my writing. Some of these themes I had anticipated in my proposal for the course, but some appeared completely new to me. I outline these below.

NAMELESSNESS, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Identity is a major theme throughout the work and is one of the "organising principles" (Dunn and Morris) which connects the autonomous pieces into a composite whole.

Despite the mutations my narrator has gone through, I intended from the outset of my project for him to remain nameless. As such, the question of names is an important one in my book. In my proposal I state the intention to make use of namelessness as a device in order to fulfil two major objectives: The first and primary was to create a parallel between my narrator and the nameless narrator in John Fowler's book, *The Cause of Hell*, thus layering and intertwining the two narratives and providing insight into the way my narrator sees himself and the world he lives in. This was critical in conveying the importance of Fowler's book to my narrator and, I hoped, would facilitate the "projections and identifications" (Bettelheim 1976: 40) of my narrator onto and with Fowler's. Although he refers to the device of namelessness in fairy tales specifically, Bettelheim's words find application in my work. For what is a work of fiction besides a fairy tale? The second reason for the nameless protagonist was to imbue writing of the narrator with feelings of homelessness and anxieties regarding his identity, thus presenting the narrator's view of the world as one he feels he does not necessarily exist in.

In effect, however, I found this very difficult to do. I struggled with scenes in which other characters might address my narrator or in which he was being introduced to others, for example. More than that, I struggled to conceptualise my own narrator. This problem became particularly clear to me during a seminar towards the middle of the second year. A number of the members of the writing group found that they too were having trouble visualising my narrator. They could accept the namelessness, they'd said, but there were some fundamental characterisation missing. They wanted to know — where did he go to school? What was his mother like? What did he think besides objectifying girls? A friend of mine, who I'd asked to

read one of my drafts, expressed a similar concern: "Just give me one detail about the narrator," she'd said. "Is he tall? Does he have dark hair? Just give me something to work with."

I realised that one of the consequences of having decided on a protagonist that didn't exist was that he didn't exist for me, either. To rectify this I made the decision to give him a name and then, if and when it felt right to do so, I would take it away. This decision gave me the freedom to write the narrator's story without my imagination of my narrator being throttled by the need to convey homelessness and un-belonging. Thus, in few different drafts of my work the narrator has had a few different names, but the one which represented him the most was David Simms. By allowing myself to first conceptualise my character as a whole being — name included — I was able to give him a backstory, a physical appearance and a way of being.

After completing the second or third draft of the creative portion, I removed all mention of David and I found that my experiment had worked. The narrator was a three-dimensional character but whose namelessness reflected his feeling of alienation and anxiety about his identity and place in the world. This experiment highlighted the power of names and as a result I contrasted my narrator with clearly-named characters in the book for whom names and places create clear delineations in how they conceive of themselves.

His artist compatriots in *"*Straight off the Deal," for example, have both names and surnames and clear places of belonging; Charlie Herriot is the fierce editor in whose apartment the narrator has been squatting hopelessly for years; Robin Filak and Georgia Reinke are inseparable novelists who find a place in each other, while Eva Scheib is a poetess who originates from Poland. The same is true of almost all of the characters in my novel: In "Linda," Linda Liebermann defines herself by discarding her parents' surname and adopting the interests of the creative living next door; in "Upington," the entire host of characters (Florence, Dot, Alice, Janine and Jeanette and the O'Neil men on the Dorperland farm) introduce themselves proudly and locate themselves clearly in places which contribute to their definition and contextualisation.

In contrast, my narrator has no home base. In "The Poet of Pigeon Valley" he does not feel at home in his mother's apartment and seeks out a place for himself in the Jouberts' house as favourite son, sibling and potential lover. Similarly, he holds poetry meetings in a forest near his school and looks for purpose and belonging in forest (a symbol of homelessness). He returns there frequently to write poems in which attempts to make sense of his life, thus setting great store in becoming a professional writer. When my narrator wins a writing competition and moves to Johannesburg he is put up in a hotel and, despite having achieved his dream of becoming a writer, he is no closer to a sense of belonging and remains homeless. In "Straight

off the Deal" the narrator sleeps on the floor of someone else's home, while in "Little Bridle," "Kitty," and "No Horse in the Race," the narrator stays in an apartment by the good graces of his uncle. Similarly, in "Upington," the narrator moves with his girlfriend into her new apartment, despite not having received a "formal invitation." In all of these instances, although he does not recognise it, his inability to self-identify results in him being unable to take ownership of a space and thus of himself.

His namelessness and un-belonging, then, renders in him the desire to find a place for himself in the world. This is the major driving force of this character and of the novel for, as Kitty says to him in "Upington": he is"trying to figure out Fowler's footsteps before putting down [his] own." The stories in my book, then, are "are invariably about that wandering—about statelessness as a state of being—and, because the narrator has no proper home, he can also have no proper name" (Sacks 2015).

Although the narrator's major question is never answered ("Why did Fowler kill himself?"), he has nevertheless managed to find some peace by the end of the novel. With the help of Kitty, who is never unwilling to lecture him on his shortcomings, he realises the futility of attempting to define himself in the pursuit of Fowler. For this reason I chose to reveal his name at the end of "Upington": Kitty addresses him as David as she points to the approaching city of Johannesburg and asks him to guess which of the buildings is theirs. This becomes the point in his life at which the narrator is able to begin separating himself from Fowler's nameless narrator as it is revealed to the reader and to him that he has both a name and a home.

DEATH

Death and obscurity are closely related in my project. For a writer, or anybody looking to preserve himself through his work, obscurity may equal death. Such as is the concern of the narrator, a failed writer himself, who fears that John Fowler's inability to make the literary hall of fame is what drove him to kill himself and so the narrator endeavours to un-obscure John Fowler's name, thus immortalizing him and perhaps in some way saving himself from that same, obscure death. As Barnes says:

> Memory is identity....You are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life you cease to be, even before your death. (*Nothing to Be Frightened Of* 2008: 140)

SEX/MASTURBATION

Sex and creativity are intimately connected in my project, though I only ever talk about masturbation; no characters have sex with each other. For the most part, the protagonists are male writers and poets who fetishize/objectify the women around them, engaging in the 'little deaths' of orgasm to light their creative flames. In some cases, the women characters are independent, sexual agents (like Alexa), and in other cases, passive sexual objects (like Kitty).

ROLE-PLAYING

Corollary to the concerns of names, identity and belonging is the preoccupation of some of my characters with playing roles they think they ought to fill. Linda, of course is a prime example of this. In "Linda" she plays the good daughter in order to escape her parents, the good wife in order to make the best of her new life and the liberal creative which affords her the power and authority which was not available to her in her other two roles. David, naturally, is a role-player as he begins his writing career more interested in playing the part of the writer than of doing any actual writing. To some extent, John Fowler joins them in this as he plays the role of good son, returning to Upington to care for his sickly mother and good husband in his marriage to Florence. Dorothy, too, plays the role of good friend to Florence as she dies of cancer. The critical thing is the irony that all of these characters (and myself as a writer included in this) played these roles in order to fulfil some desire — for David (and me) it was becoming a writer, for Linda it was gaining some autonomy, for Fowler it was his familial duty and for Dorothy it was to escape feelings of guilt — but which became ultimately unattainable as they were lost in the posturing.

ARCHETYPICAL WOMEN

In my proposal I expressed the following concern:

> The treatment of women might become problematic in the wider, feminist critical field, though my intentions are, in both cases, to present the *human* condition as one which is dependent on sex. Because most of my narrators are male, the characterisation of female characters under the male gaze is what makes such a treatment problematic, not the characterisation of women in and of itself. This will be a point of study and reflection in the reflective essay part of my thesis.

I am no longer concerned with my novel's treatment of women being considered problematic. I think, after reading the book, that it will be clear that the characterisation of some of the women as sexual/sexualised objects is, as I say in my proposal, more of a comment on the

treatment of (some) women by (some) men and not a problem with the way I as an author view or characterise women.

Having said this I did identify some archetypical female characters which may be an indicate problematic characterisations of females in my novels. Although the inclusion of archetypical female characters may, in and of itself, not be a bad thing (archetypes exist simply because they are employed frequently), I acknowledge that this may be a potential point of criticism in my novel.

Some of the archetypical female characters I can readily identify are: Animé as "hooker with a heart of gold" (or, the virtuous sex worker), Linda Liebermann as the "Iron Lady" (the alpha-woman who plays men's games better than they do), Kitty as the "Emotionless Girl" (the enigmatic, emotionless girl who is no good in social situations but seems to have some kind of intellectual superpower as a result of this detachment), Florence Fowler as the "Proper Lady" (the gentle yet strong woman, incorruptible to a fault and willing to sacrifice herself for the good of her family and, usually, in particular her husband) and, finally, Margaret Fowler as "The Evil Matriarch" (mother who is controlling and manipulative and whom is often physically or emotionally abusive to one or more of the children) (*TVTropes*).

CONCLUSION

While writing *The Cause of Hell and Other Stories*, I must have started at least four different novels, killed off a dozen desperate characters and named, un-named and re-named my protagonist nearly every time another character spoke to him. I struggled immensely with the writing process and, although my classmates assured me this was not visible in the final work, I spent most of the two years of this MA oscillating between anxiously under-writing and anxiously over-writing. I changed plots, characters, names, ages and structures. After all of this, in the end I landed up more or less where I had started and I found myself staring at a creative project of around eighty-thousand words which seemed to fulfil most of the aims and objectives I had laid out in my proposal. For some reason which I have not quite identified yet, I found this very frustrating. I thought that for all the work I had put into changing everything around so many times, I should have at least come out with something slightly different. But this, I realise as I put this reflective essay together, is part and parcel of the writing process.

This reflective essay has not been easy, either. While I have written five drafts of the thing, none are the same and, in fact, the completely disparate versions have been difficult to reconcile and it has been a great struggle to get to this final version. Fortunately this essay has made me do exactly what it says in the name — reflect on hell — and the numerous versions of this essay all seemed to have reflected on one or other major aspect of this hell and neglected other equally important components of not only the writing process but the role that the practice-led group discussions played in shaping the project I am submitting.

Thus the drafts of this essay become, paradoxically, incredibly useful tools to condense my thoughts, drawing out the most salient points of each in order to reflect on the overall writing process which, for me, has been tough-going, disjointed, insecure and finally, quite liberating. In a way, the process of writing my project has been my very own cause of hell – a difficult and frustrating process, which has nevertheless allowed me to finally write my other stories.

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