

truth or dare

Some novelists court strife by pilfering character traits and plotlines from friends and lovers

Story Susan Johnson Photography Russell Shakespeare

This month my new novel, *My Hundred Lovers*, comes out. Written as a mock memoir, it's the story of a woman's life told through her body's memories. As with previous books I anticipate some readers will confuse fact with fiction and mistake my actual life with my imaginative life, the world inside the book for the world we walk around in. The provocative title quite consciously plays around with this confusion: in the first draft the main character was even called "Susan".

Ever since my first novel, *Messages From Chaos*, was published in 1987, some readers have supposed me to write *romans à clef* (in French, "novels with a key" but colloquially taken to mean books drawn directly from life and based on real characters). As with most writers so charged, my first response is outrage: don't these people know how *hard* it is to imagine – and then write and complete – a book?

Seven novels and two non-fiction works later, it doesn't upset me like it used to. Now I take it as a backhanded compliment that some readers believe I have created such a believable world that it could be nothing *but* the truth. The more humble and prosaic reality is that a book is like a dream, made of real things remembered and half-forgotten, of incidents and faces, a rich stew

of memories and feelings and dim movements glimpsed from the corner of an eye. Yes, my books are my life and spring from my deepest self, in the same way that my dreams are mine and your dreams are yours, peopled by the truths of your life. Yes, my books use emotional truths drawn from my relationships and observations, and sometimes actual incidents from my life have found their way into my fiction, but as for faithfully following day-to-day details, well, a book has the same relationship to my waking life as a dream does. Yet at the same time, who hasn't – me included – stopped to wonder while reading a work of fiction whether the events described actually happened to their author?

I am hardly the first novelist – and will not be the last – to be charged with writing thinly disguised memoir dressed up as fiction. First fashionable in 17th century France, where writers loved to include recognisable members of Louis XIV's court in their books as insider jokes to amuse their friends, *romans à clef* got up readers' noses from the start. As long as there have been books there have been people unhappy about what is inside them, and writers everywhere have long lived with the threat of their books either being found wanting by reviewers or readers or, worse, becoming the subject of libel suits.

In 1996, when Brisbane writer Nick Earls

launched his celebrated novel *Zigzag Street*, he was presented with a "joke" defamation writ from one of his real-life friends, aggrieved to find himself depicted as a character. While the "joke" caused Earls to blanch and stop in the middle of his launch speech, it had the further effect of making the audience aware – and therefore the public – that real flesh-and-blood people can and do get hurt by a writer's desire to write the book, no matter what.

In a brilliant and painfully honest 1999 essay in the now-defunct *Imago* magazine, Earls's former close friend, Brisbane academic Stuart Glover (on whom the central character in *Zigzag Street*, Richard Derrington, is acknowledged to be based), wrote that he was partly flattered to be "immortalised" in print. But mostly he, too, felt aggrieved, as though "things have been taken from my private domain, to be used and owned by some[one] else in the public realm". Glover wrote that he was completely unprepared for the "sense of trespass and envy" that the novel roused in him.

After the friends fell out, Earls presented Glover with a legal document assuring all parties that Glover would not sue if the book were made into a film. Glover rewrote the document, insisting Earls agree he had based part of *Zigzag Street* on Glover's own life, and asked that he ►

– but how far is too far?



be acknowledged in any plays or future editions of the novel. Earls signed it.

Today, Glover says “it all feels like so long ago”, but he and Earls are still not speaking. He tells me that he has since released Earls from any requirement for acknowledgement and “to be honest, I prefer it that way”. Brisbane remains a small town in terms of its literary community and Glover has sometimes found himself playing the will-or-won’t-Nick-Earls-be-there game. But in the end he knows the friendship could not have continued: “Using friends’ lives in fiction makes it impossible to remain intimate friends – it uses up the oxygen in the friendship; there is no longer any space for confidences,” he says.

Earls himself prefers not to comment, believing that the whole thing long ago became “an impossible story to set straight”. What the squabble reveals, of course, is the moral dilemma at the heart of all art: how much of life should be sacrificed for it?

In 1973, when Erica Jong came to write her feminist classic *Fear of Flying* – which sold 18 million copies – she thought she was writing a mock memoir, à la *Moll Flanders* or *Robinson Crusoe*. Discussing the book in 2008 at a conference at New York’s Columbia University, she told the audience that she “never thought anyone would take it literally, especially a member of my very intelligent family”. Jong was more surprised than anyone when questions from the audience were called for and her sister, Suzanna Daou, stood up and announced: “I love my sister very much, but *Fear of Flying* has been a thorn in my flesh for 35 years.” Another sister, Claudia Oberweger, looked on aghast. The incident was later reported by *The New Yorker*’s Rebecca Mead, who spoke to Daou afterwards. “Erica used me, and she used my husband, who was a very kind man, a very handsome man. I just felt I had to do it. It was not a novel; it was a memoir, but it was a memoir something like James Frey’s memoir [*A Million Little Pieces*, published in 2003, and later exposed as mostly fiction]. A lot of nastiness went into that book [*Fear of Flying*]. But I forgive her for everything, except writing that my husband crawled into her bed, which he didn’t, and asked her to perform fellatio, which he didn’t.”

Daou described herself and her sisters as “extremely close”, but added that she didn’t think Jong would be speaking to her for some time. “God forgive me, I didn’t mean to do it. But I am at peace,” she told Mead. As might be expected, Jong herself defended her right to write the book. She said it had been written without any expectations of publication and the only thing she knew was that “if I didn’t write that book, I would go mad or die”. Its success had taken her by surprise and she still felt honoured to have been given that gift, “and it is a gift – but also a curse”.



As long as there have been books there have been people unhappy about what is inside them.



Form over content ... Author Johnson argues the case for a novel to be judged for what it is, not its source material.

FROM THE FIRST, MY BOOKS HAVE SOMETIMES been regarded in certain circles as the inferior work of a journalist who never quite made it to writing “real” fiction. It was once reported to me that a former friend remarked at a Brisbane dinner party that she hated “that book Sue wrote about so-and-so”. Here was the assumption that “so-and-so” had been delivered straight to the page, in her entirety, and that there was not a glimmer of distinction between life and art.

Unlike fellow authors David Malouf, John Birmingham, Veny Armano, Nick Earls, Kate Morton or Andrew McGahan, I’ve never had a big profile as a Queensland writer. This is partly because I fell between two stools – too young for the generation of Malouf and the late poet Peter Porter, and too old for the re-styled “BrisVegas” of Nick Earls – and partly because I lived away from Queensland for more years than I lived here. But *Messages From Chaos* was set in Brisbane, much of the action taking part in that miraculous survivor of the gentrification of New Farm, those old red brick flats, “Baysmere”, in Bowen Terrace that you see on your right as you come off the Story Bridge into the city. I never lived in “Baysmere” but I longed to, imagining myself occupying an airy, upstairs flat, the Story Bridge hanging like a decoration in my window.

My modest fame among my former friends as a writer of *romans à clef* began with my first review – as it happened, in *The Courier-Mail*. The reviewer concluded by asking what I could possibly write next, since I had obviously written myself out, having used up my entire life story. I certainly had not helped my case by making the protagonist of the novel a journalist as I had been, as well as making her the same age as me.

A coming-of-age novel, *Chaos* tells the story of Anna Lawrence’s chaotic and sometimes amusing romantic adventures, essentially asking a more important question about how a young person chooses how to live. Anna’s real quest is identity: who am I? Who do I want to be?

No-one threatened to sue me. But I did not expect the rush of ex-boyfriends clamouring to identify themselves as Anna’s seedy, tight-arsed, amoral boyfriend, Jimmy West. One ex in particular was livid and – years later – wrote me a short, sharp email reprimanding me for the book. However, I had also heard that on numerous occasions this same ex outed himself as the model for Jimmy West. It is clear that the same conflicting emotions of pride and fury experienced by Stuart Glover are common to anyone who imagines himself depicted in a book, no matter how glancing or how central or how erroneously.

A more serious incident occurred in 1994 with the publication of my fourth novel, *Hungry Ghosts*. Set in Hong Kong, where I lived for a few years, it told of experiences that were close – but never identical – to events in my own life. This was the book that my former friend “hated” and she could not have possibly have known how much of the story was imagined (quite a lot, in fact). For a while it looked as if someone might even sue me; mercifully, it came to nothing.

I believe Anthony Burgess’s maxim that “books are objects, not adjuncts of personality”. In other words, that a book in order to become a book must be cut from its moorings and be judged for what it is, not for what it was once tethered to. No-one cares beyond, say, 20 or 30 people if so-and-so was the template for a character. What matters to me, still, is how bad or good a book is. But what also matters to me now, as it must also matter to so-and-so, is whether – like Nick Earls and Erica Jong – I have violated a trust. It is only after a distance of almost 20 years that I can understand that, and further accept I may have caused pain. I have grown a literary conscience.

But, paradoxically, nowadays I also feel much less certain about what a writer’s rights actually are. It doesn’t matter to me any more if people think my work is drawn from life. In writing *My Hundred Lovers* – and in initially deciding to call the main character “Susan” – I had some literary fun by running towards the accusation of thinly disguised memoir instead of running away from it. An editor talked me into changing the “Susan” to “Deborah” at the last moment, but I don’t care if everyone who reads the book still thinks that it’s really me. I might have grown a literary conscience but I can still have some fun and give that horrible man a really, really small willy. ■ *My Hundred Lovers* by Susan Johnson (Allen & Unwin, \$28) is published on Monday.