Work submitted for the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA)

**THE IMMIGRANT – a Biographical Memoir**

Comprising

Thesis by Creative Artefact

*(The Immigrant – A Biographical Memoir)*

and

Exegesis

*(Writing The Immigrant)*

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ABSTRACT

*The Immigrant* and *Writing The Immigrant* by Shelley Davidow

(Artefact: 70,000 words; Exegesis: 28,000 words)

Through engagement with practice-led research, my discoveries about immersion theory and the complex idea of inherited memory, I explore the idea of ‘a whispering in the blood,’ in my creative artefact, *The Immigrant*. My narrative (thesis) reveals repeated motifs in the lives of my Ashkenazi Jewish forebears spanning five generations and five continents.

In my exegesis, *Writing the Immigrant*, the intricate process of writing my biographical memoir is revealed. The exegesis is a parallel text to my creative artefact and is itself, a narrative (Krauth 2011). *Writing the Immigrant* is a complement to the artefact and has become its own non-fictional narrative, mapping a journey in much the same way as *The Immigrant* maps a journey, neither pure supplement, nor single critical evaluation of the text. It is revelatory in essence and seeks to uncover the invisible story that joins *The Immigrant* to its reader.

The exegesis and thesis align themselves with the ethos revealed on the University of New South Wales’ website with regard to its creative writing research degrees:

> …we encourage a far more flexible connection between the creative and the critical: a complementary and dialogic relationship, rather than a supplementary and explanatory one. (School of English, Media and Performing Arts 2015)

*Writing the Immigrant* is my response to the unspoken questions that may have arisen during the act of reading in the mind of the reader. As such, it is a memoir of its own…a response to perceived reader curiosity.

The exegesis a harmonious counterpoint; a journey through practice-led research, into the territory of 1) trans-generational memory, 2) immersion in voice through letters 3) narrative empathy.
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

This is to certify that this submission is all my own work, completed under the supervision of the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Shelley Davidow ___________________ Date: ____________________________
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the following people with gratitude for their invaluable assistance in creating this work. The work would not have come into being if not for Associate Professor Gary Crew who told me to write something true; my thanks to Dr Ross Watkins for sharp insights on the final draft.

Paul and Tim for treasured support, and for giving me time and space.

There would be no memoir without these members of my immediate family: my dad, Bob Davidow (1939-2014) whose love, phone conversations and the gift of the miraculous box of letters fuelled this writer’s pen…my gratitude to him always for his trust that I would do things right. The book would not have been written without the e-mail from Woody Davidow, offering to send me scans of Bertha Davidow’s diaries, which changed my life, and which I did not even know existed. My thanks to him for invaluable feedback on early and later drafts. To Amy Davidow, for reading and seeing the final draft; to Maureen Davidow and Marianne Davidow for scans and pics. To Carol Liknitzky, David Liknitzky, Matthew Liknitzky, Paul Liknitzky, Larry Davidow, Jake Davidow, for understanding the love that ties us all together across oceans and continents and over generations.
The creative artefact has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

It is available via UQP:

EXEGESIS

Writing the Immigrant

Introduction

Through a discussion of my engagement with practice-led research, my discoveries about immersion theory and the complex idea of inherited memory, I am setting out to reveal the intricate process of writing my 70,000 word biographical memoir The Immigrant (forthcoming UQP, 2016 as ‘A Whispering in the Blood’).

This exegesis is a parallel text to my creative artefact The Immigrant in that it is its own narrative (Krauth 2011). Writing the Immigrant is a complement to the artefact and has become its own non-fictional narrative, mapping a journey in much the same way as The Immigrant maps a journey, neither supplement, nor critical evaluation of the text. It does not provide a theoretical rationale, but rather, is revelatory in essence and seeks to uncover the invisible story that joins The Immigrant to its reader.

The exegesis aligns itself with the ethos revealed on the University of New South Wales’ website with regard to its creative writing research degrees:

…we encourage a far more flexible connection between the creative and the critical: a complementary and dialogic relationship, rather than a supplementary and explanatory one. (School of English, Media and Performing Arts 2010)

Writing the Immigrant is my response to the unspoken questions that may have arisen during the act of reading The Immigrant in the mind of the reader. As such, it is a memoir of its own…a response to perceived reader curiosity.

Because my exegesis is ‘performative’ (Haseman 2006) and functions as creative discourse, I use narrative techniques such as dialogue, characterisation, a narrative arc, and the epistolary (graphics, photos, scanned letters and diary entries) in order to document the unfolding story of my family’s immigration journeys in what Krauth calls the parallel text, one which ‘produce[s] its own story and runs as a distinctive parallel narrative… a back-story, a subtext’ (Krauth 2002).
The role of this exegesis is not so much to explain but rather to enrich or deepen or embroider the artefact. The exegesis is not first or second order knowledge about the artefact but a legitimisation of creative discourse as performative research: ‘the creative language of fiction will give our research [in the exegesis] a performative, “embedded”, “three dimensional” quality that conventional discourse often lacks’ (Williams 2012)

In other words, the exegesis, following Krauth, is no longer a ‘critical journal, a reflective account of processes undertaken while creating the accompanying work’ but ‘it is itself an artefact, a system of parallel texts. It’s an exegesis not just concerned with its novel, it’s self-consciously about writing itself’ (2011).

This work is then a harmonious counterpoint to the artefact: a journey through practice-led research into the territory of: 1) inherited memory, or a ‘whispering in the blood’; 2) immersion in voice through letters; 3) revelations about narrative empathy and the effect reading empathetic texts has on the human brain.

This response also highlights how the objective and the innovation in *The Immigrant* are the same: the dissolution of the ‘other’ through empathy.

**Background**

I grew up in South Africa in the 1970s at the height of Apartheid and witnessed and experienced things that shocked me into wakefulness very early. I was seven years old, and we were buying juice for school early one morning in a local café, when the white shopkeeper shot a black man dead.

I grew older, and South Africa’s status as a pariah country with a brutal racist regime became an intolerable reality, and by the time I was a teenager I had begun to plan escaping the violent, decaying outpost of white colonialism. I feared for my life on a daily basis, and watched the economy sliding as inflation rose and food prices went up at an unprecedented rate. I predicted that I would not be able to live a sustainable life under such volatile circumstances. Not only that: my adopted sister, Daisy, who was black, highlighted for me the inextricable connectedness of the
personal and the political. In South Africa, we seemed to all be forever circumscribed by race, heritage and political allegiance, before we were regarded as human beings.

I made my plans to wrestle myself free of the confines of my country just before the end of Apartheid, and I thought I was making a unique decision. I had no idea that I was following in the footsteps of my forefathers: I was retracing historical decisions and journeys that began far back in time.

When I began to write *The Immigrant*, I was unaware of the discoveries I would make, not simply about the writing process, but about the nature of reality, and the baffling truths of my own journey. These revealed that my life was far from unique; that there were a continuation of themes and motifs that could be traced back at the very least, to a moment in time when my great-grandfather, Jacob David Frank, stepped onto a ship that left Europe for America in about 1913 to escape the pogroms and persecution suffered by many Jews in early 20th century Europe.
Methodology: Practice-led Research

Practice-led research in the creative arts is about documenting the unchartered territory of the inner creative journey. The act of writing, in this case, leads to the next step, to revelations.

When I wrote my creative artefact, *The Immigrant*, I became a mapper of previously undiscovered territories. Practice-led research:

…requires an ‘art of thought’, a certain tact, by which artists might track their movements into the unknown, as they pursue the ‘lines of flight’ of their…writing… In so doing, they may manage to represent something of the thought at the root of their art (Dallow 2003, p. 50).

So, as a metaphorical archeologist, tracking my movements into the unknown, I began writing *The Immigrant* with assumptions about what I would discover, given the territory and what I knew already about the craft of writing and the lives of my ancestors buried in the past.

In my practice-led and practice-based research I have attempted to address the theory/practice divide between artefact and the exegesis. I am hoping to show, in what follows, that the artefact can, in itself, be a valid form of academic discourse, and that this exegesis exists as an extension of the artefact rather than a critical commentary.

Practice-led research in the arts has been taking place for some time now…’ A person makes something. Or in this case, writes something. In the process, new knowledge in the specific field of creativity (writing) emerges. The single element that sets practice-led research apart from the simple practice of creating something is this:

(An) important distinction between personal practitioner research and doctoral practice- based research is the form that the knowledge generated takes. The practice-based doctoral research outcome that is shared with a wider community arises from a structured process that is defined in university examination regulations (Brien 2006, p. 2).

There it is: instead of new knowledge residing in the head and craft of a ‘practitioner’, it is given shape and dimension in the form of an academically recognisable thesis, which is critically reflective and investigates soundly, the new knowledge that emerges from the practice, which is then added to the general body of knowledge in the area of practice—in this case, Creative Writing.
Linda Candy writes of Practice-Led research: ‘The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice’ (2006, p.1).

In the case of the artefact, *The Immigrant*, the focus is to advance knowledge within my practice.

Within that practice, the methodology of ‘Bricolage’ is the most accurate description of how the practice-led research methodology operates. It is best described as a do-it-yourself endeavour that works in an integrative and competitive way, where paradigms overlap and perspectives shift and change (Stewart 2001). Bricolage is an improvisation—the word is derived from the French ‘bricoler’, meaning ‘to tinker’. The term is used in fields as diverse as computer software, philosophy, education and creative writing. Bricolage refers to how a creative endeavour arises out of whatever might be available to the creator. As a creative writer, the author pilfers from a diverse range of resources to construct the artefact. In the process of writing *The Immigrant*, I undertook research into history, genetics, neuroscience, medicine and literature; I read fiction and non-fiction.

In order to describe Chicago and Indiana in the 1920’s I listened to music, looked at old photographs and read news reports. Health issues were prevalent in the family and affected everything in their lives. My father had told me that the reason for Bertha’s many miscarriages was that she had a bicornuate uterus. I researched her condition in order to accurately describe her experience. Congenital heart defects in South African Jews were highly prevalent at the time. Woolf, Dora, Phil and several cousins died of heart disease very early on. Research into the genetic traits and weaknesses of South African Ashkenazi Jews led to the sudden idea that there was a metaphorical ‘whispering in the blood’ that predisposed my family to ‘losing heart’ quite literally. I used what I could find and those layers enriched the artefact and the process itself. This exemplifies the term ‘bricolage.’

Practice-led research meant that I could interrogate the creative artefact as it was being created, documenting and reflecting on the process. There is an element of profound improvisation in acts of creativity, and writing creatively, whether it be fiction or non-fiction, is no exception. In research that is practice-based, the writer is often in a position where the work seems to take on a life of its own, and the writer has to step back in a sense, and trust those opaque regions of the psyche out of which
dreams spin into narratives and characters take off in unplanned directions. As Norman Mailer notes in *The Spooky Art*, trying to tie a work of fiction too closely to research or methodology (research-led practice) can lead to a writer literally choking the life out of the novel (2004). Creative non-fiction, in this case the writing of *The Immigrant*, follows a similar pattern. Jane Goodall writes in ‘Nightmares in the Engine Room’ that:

> The spooky art of fiction-writing involves a commitment to improvisation and randomness, a submission to the erasure of authorial design, a readiness to be mesmerised by place and possessed by psychological energies from competing directions (Goodall 2009, p. 200).

In my practice-led research, even though the artefact falls into the genre of non-fiction, the same process took place. I wrote the first draft as an ‘improvisation.’ I had immersed myself in the voices of the letter-writers and the story emerged at first without plotting or planning or ‘authorial design’. This is the essence of practice-led research, and because I wrote allowing history, character, my own imagination of events and letters to compete for attention, there was always the risk that the narrative would falter or hit a dead-end. However, the ‘spooky art’ refers to the writer trusting that there is a deep pattern that emerges in the narrative, that knows where it is going once the author steps back and allows place and ‘psychological energies’ to direct the course. It was then in the author’s (my) interest, to be able to evaluate when the rush of improvisation and inspiration needed to be tempered by authorial control and adherence to the historical ‘facts’ and process to create a blend where the ultimate aim was to maintain emotional ‘truth’ to real characters in the real past. In the end, the second draft simply required a paring away of insignificant details to reveal a clear and coherent narrative.

My research required an approach that drew broadly on other disciplines enabling me to acquire a working (rather than a specialist) knowledge in diverse areas: neuroscience, psychology, and history, for example. It included innovative and unpredictable forays into several disciplines which informed my creative work.

Through re-imagined voices, I traced narrative threads which appeared to connect generations. The characters in the book repeat the same journeys as their forebears in what appears to be the result of an inherited disposition. I have gone beyond conventional notions of autobiography and memoir and my methodology has lead me to employ fictional techniques and practice-based research, to frame my
process within the contexts of transgenerational memory, immersion theory and narrative empathy.

The research in my creative artefact explores the idea of Jewish ethnicity from a unique perspective. The focus is not on the inherited practices or traditions of a culture, but on my own account of ‘perceived inherited dispositions’ that emerge as a consecutive emotional narrative in lives that span three centuries.

Typically, autobiography and memoir strive for realist representations of actual events. The Immigrant undermines linear narrative and the idea of ‘truth’ as far as it claims to represent reality. The book is episodic and the reader is thrown from the distant past into the immediate present, back and forth, so that the book’s ‘episodes’ emerge just as memories do. The book also mirrors the fact that as I read the hundreds of letters, history did not emerge chronologically, and yet themes built themselves gradually into an unfolding story that eventually formed a complete picture.

I used minimalism. Less, so often, is more. Minimalism emerged as an approach used by twentieth century writers Ernest Hemingway and Truman Capote. In essence, the characteristics of minimalism as a literary device is that meaning resides in what is left unwritten, unsaid.

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writing is written truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.

(Hemingway, p. 192)

In minimalism, the deeper meaning is implied by the actions the characters take. The vocabulary is pared-down and the narrative and characters are not always explained to the reader. For example, Joshua Lourie’s feelings for Bertha emerge through his words and actions, just as in minimalism in literature, words are used to reveal, not to explain or resolve. Dialogue reveals character and the use of adjectives and adverbs is minimal. Thus Bertha’s complex resolve not to succumb to Joshua Lourie, for example, has great emotional impact because the reader is invited to ‘fill in’ the myriad possibilities of her feelings for him. Literary minimalism as I employed it in the construction of Bertha’s character and in the revelation of the theme of a ‘whispering in the blood’ was all about providing what was essential and allowing the
reader the space in between the words to construct meaning. In Bertha’s relationship with Phil especially, because it was a deeply complex situation, I allowed the reader to link and infer rather than being given everything explicitly. Minimalism was one of the literary devices commonly found in fiction, which allowed me to explore metaphor and connectedness, without over-writing or being too explicit as I traced the lives of my forebears.

Practice-led research is an umbrella term for a myriad of journeys that lead to endlessly unique findings. During the writing process, discoveries are made that could not have been pre-empted. They are as limitless and unique as the number of snowflakes or the number of different ways waves break over rocks over time. They range from uncovering facts that influence plot or character, to learning about which tense or style to employ for a particular work, to discovering what, indeed, the book or story is really about. As all writers know, there is a kind of writing which is much closer to dreaming than it is to building.

Practice-led research allows for us as writers to document our journey into the realm of the unconscious, so that we have a safe space to say: I am an explorer in an unknown land, and though I have a sense of what might lie ahead, I could be utterly wrong. When we emerge, though, we document and map the journey and the findings in the hope that another explorer at another time will find this useful. In the process we explicitly recognise the inner territory of the imaginative realm as valid terrain worthy of this research.

The unconscious, out of which our deepest inspirations and stories emerge, may throw up new and unexpected characters, themes, plot twists and crafting skills that we will later recognise as essential characteristics of this work, but which we know emerged during the act of creating, and did not seem to exist before.

Through practice-led research, we usefully enable academia to perceive the creative work of artists and writers as pieces worthy of research, as documentable forays into territories that are usually, at least for writers, mostly invisible, intangible and that yield results that are also mostly invisible and intangible. It is the mapping of the creative journey that has just been undertaken.

The justification for practice-led research is that certain kinds of knowledge can be created only through practice. Research into those kinds of artistic and applied knowledge is necessarily conducted as part of the practice. The practice-led research methodology is the doing of the work of creativity (Green 2006, p. 176).
In the case of writing *The Immigrant*, practice-led research was my methodological approach.

What follows is the mapping of the research I did before and during the time the book was written, the back-story and the side-story, which charts the journey, and how that led ultimately to new and unexpected knowledge in both the praxis of creative writing and also in the understanding that life and art are inextricably part of the same fabric.

**The Story Behind the Story**

Initially I had a simple and clear idea for my project: I planned to write about Bertha Frank, my paternal grandmother’s life. I knew a few things: that she was born in the USA in 1916 to immigrant Lithuanian parents; that her mother died when she was ten; that she grew up in an orphanage and that in her early twenties she left the USA on a boat to South Africa, to marry a man she’d never met.

That seemed like an intriguing story, and I was unsure as to whether I would write a fictional account of her life, or a biography. I didn’t have any documents, didn’t know whether any existed, and I felt that if nothing turned up I had an interesting enough premise to create a gripping immigrant saga.

The most obvious place to start, I knew, was with talking to my dad about his mother, to see what he remembered of her life. Our first conversation yielded information that changed my thinking immediately about the type of book I would be writing.

Bertha Frank came out to South Africa at the age of 22 to marry a man ten years her senior. My life and hers were perhaps connected in more ways than I had imagined. This was only the tip of a multigenerational iceberg.

I realised that, having myself immigrated to five different continents before the age of 39, I had an in-depth understanding for the immigrant experience, and that it was this experience that drew me to Bertha’s story.

At this time I was already living in Australia and my dad, Bob, was in South Africa. He was, of course, the link to my grandmother’s life, though I had known her well into my own adulthood as she had passed away in 2001.

So our conversations were by phone and sometimes, when my Australian internet connection didn’t bomb out on us—South Africa has more sophisticated
broadband than Australia, believe it or not!—via Skype. Our first conversations, of course, were about Bertha (Granny Bee’s) early life in Hammond Indiana, her mother’s death, the fact that her father couldn’t care for her and her brother Mike, and about the Jewish Orphan Home in Cleveland Ohio, which my grandmother liked less than her brother did.

Over the months that followed, my dad and I talked more than we had in decades. We grew closer than ever before and uncovered the past together. ‘You know, Shell,’ my Dad said. ‘If you want to know more about my mom’s life, you should give Uncle Mike a call. He’s still in Oregon. Still sharp as nails, and turning 93 this year. He’d love to hear from you. His father, you know, was a wig-maker and he ran away from the Pogroms in Lithuania. So you can also get some info about Jacob Frank, their dad.’

I contacted my great-Uncle Mike in Ashland, Oregon, whom I hadn’t seen for about twenty years. He was so happy to hear from me. What followed was a wonderful exchange of creative work. He sent me some of his (unpublished) writing and I sent him some of my books. He sent me a CD of him playing the harmonica. He was warm and kind and inspiringly lucid. He had lived nearly a century and remembered much of his life.

I re-established contact with my dad’s brother Woody, in Israel. I tried to find Gertrude Fogelson, my gran’s close childhood friend, who in 2012 was still alive at age 97, somewhere in the USA, but my letters to the addresses I found were all returned to sender.

The process of tracing my grandmother’s life and her heritage produced its own story, this exegesis, which runs as a distinctive parallel narrative to my book *The Immigrant*. According to Nigel Krauth, the exegesis in itself forms a back-story, a subtext (Krauth 2002). Here is that back-story:

In June, 2012, came a revelation. ‘Shell…’ my dad said on the phone. ‘With regard to your research for your book. I have this box of letters…all the letters my mom kept, written to her from about early 1930s till she died.’

‘What? I don’t believe it.’

‘Yup. I have. And in that collection is every single letter my dad wrote to her, including his marriage proposal.’
'Where was it?’

‘Just hiding in all my stuff. I just dug it up. In there are all the letters from Uncle Mike (her brother) after she left the States to come and live in South Africa. If you’re interested in having them, I’d like you to. I can’t read them anyway…it’s all too close to home.’

‘Dad, I would love them.’

And so my direction changed irrevocably. I knew that what I would be writing would be as close to the truth as I could possibly make it.

This was practice-led research. The theoretical aspect of my research became deeply personal, and the personal journey contributed to my evolving theories.

Getting the box of letters from South Africa to Australia was a story in itself, but eventually, it arrived. In a digital age in which the possibility of finding a box of handwritten letters reflecting an entire milieu grows increasingly remote, this discovery was nothing short of miraculous. The effect, I believe, is that the type of authenticity of character and voice, the immersion in the smell (of old paper and vestiges of perfume), sight (the handwriting, the choice of paper) and cadence of another era was completely unique and leant itself towards my task of re-imagining, as closely as possible, the lives of my forebears. There may come a time when finding a single hand-written letter in this world is a rare thing, and as such, the value of the box of letters in terms of what it enabled was rare and may even grow in significance into the distant digital and virtual future.
Journal entry, November 18th 2012

I heard from my dad weeks ago that Uncle Mike was suddenly very ill and his body was ‘shutting down.’ I can’t believe it. He seemed to be so fine. So upsetting. Don’t know what’s going on…

I finally opened and read TONS of letters from 1936 onwards. AMAZING. I’m sitting on the floor, the rain is pouring down outside and around me is a time warp and the ghosts of relatives and family all around. There are echoes of struggle and war, dating and dancing in New York and Chicago in the 1930’s…engagements and travel plans, marriage in a foreign country; loneliness, the birth of my dad, a lost baby, malaria and tick-bite fever, my grandfather Phil’s death at age 54; my gran’s scrawl documenting our family tree and hundreds of letters from Uncle Mike (Meyer), his initial distrust of his sister’s plan to go to Africa; his letter to Phil accepting the idea that she could go; his first thoughts about following her there after college. Because I found some of the letters in chronological order and some very haphazardly thrown together, births, deaths, morning love-notes from Phil to ‘Bert’ are all spread out in a panorama of time around me—generations and lives unfolding with bizarre rapidity as I read at the speed of light, scanning for information. When I finally found Phil’s letters to Bert my heart was really pounding. I could feel a strange energy around the envelopes, the notes, his writing. Perhaps that energy was her fierce treasuring of the letters…the incredible possibility that was in them before she went to Africa when she was just newly out of the orphan home…

There are funny things too: Mike telling her that she’s too fat at 130 lbs (I weigh 127 lbs!!) and telling her to diet, for Gods’ Sake! Phil seems besotted with her even before he meets her. At one point later she seems to treat him coolly. His note to her says they were ‘like strangers’. He also tells her not to play too much tennis as it tires her out. (She had heart issues then but didn’t know it). Then…there are her notes documenting her mother’s death at the age of 40 on April 10th, 1927. I was born on April 11th at 4 am, which is still April the 10th in the USA. There’s a heartbreaking letter of condolence from Gertrude her friend, about Phil’s death from a heart attack.
He’d lost his business and the stress must have proven too much. It’s so strange, as HER voice is silent. Yet all these letters define and determine her life and a little bit, what she must have been like as a youngster (Davidow 2012).

The first letter I read was written by Uncle Mike, just under a year before I was born. A picture emerged from between the lines that was to be the first of many: a ghostly apparition of the invisible reader (my gran) and the story that seeped towards me in the 21st century from behind the words.
I was overcome by that final picture of loss: a father, unable to leave anything to his children; my Granny Bee, poor right until the end of her life. The end of last hopes dreams and the taste of disappointment as she read this letter from her brother.

I could see much about her character from this: she had no money; she must have wanted to go back to the States to visit. Her father, Jacob, had died without being able to leave a penny to his children. His legacy was dissolution in every way. Her character, and now inadvertently her father’s began to take shape in my mind.

I confirmed the details in my next conversation with my dad. Granny Bee had been out of America for almost fifty years before she returned to visit in the 1980s. That visit was paid for by the Alumni of the Jewish Orphan Home. And Jacob had been poor all his life. I found the final papers from the State confirming that they had indeed taken every last penny at his death.

Later, somewhere buried in older letters, was a note to Bee from her brother Mike, that their father Jacob had likely come to America aboard the SS Graf Waldersee with his friend Henry.

I heard from my dad that Jacob had been a violinist; he used to teach children to play, and was a very talented man, though he could not read music. The violin was a symbol that emerged later as I wrote the book, but initially, I didn’t understand the depth of the motif that had started to weave itself into my imagining of the story.

When I was ten I fell in love with the sound of the violin listening to tapes of classical music.

Journal Entry 15th December 2012
The real story of the violin: when my Dad was about 9 he ‘expressed the wish to learn the violin,’’ he said. His mother, Bertha, wrote to her father Jacob and told him. Jacob sent to my dad, a beautiful ¾ size violin. So when I was 11 and wanted to learn the violin my Dad gave me the one Jacob sent him. Thus, my first violin did indeed come from Jacob my great-grandfather…I still ache to play well, but it’s likely be that I will always be able to write about music with more beauty than will ever exist in my playing… (Journal 2012).

Of course, the reason I had given up learning the violin at age eleven was that my violin teacher had been appalled at the fact that despite his best efforts, I had been playing every piece he taught me entirely by ear…and I could not bear to continue in light of his crushing disappointment at my ostensible lack of ability in the music-reading department.
I had initially planned to write the story of Bertha Frank. Now, however, I was discovering that deep threads ran through those lives lived before mine, into the present day.

The image of a young man in Lithuania, escaping the Pogroms in the early 20th century and throwing himself in desperation onto a ship that would cross the Atlantic, ‘wrote itself out’ without effort as the beginning of The Immigrant.

The spring of 1913, and a young man from a remote village in Lithuania steals a ride on a train headed for the border. Everything around him has turned to the colour of ash, as the cold seeps across the land, pressing any signs of life deep into the ground.

Perhaps it is written in his blood: a special code which will emerge later in someone else, generations into the future, in nightmares and fears; in someone’s inability to breathe.

In Vilnius, the frowning buildings as he arrives stop him from breathing.

He has a sense of impending tragedy. Maybe his lack of breath has to do with the act of leaving. And yet, who would ache to leave this behind—this wasteland of grief and broken souls? Pogroms and nights of bloodshed and terror will live in him no matter how far he travels. Loss has encoded itself in the flow of his blood, in the beating of his heart—a ghost that will travel through time, through his DNA.

His lack of breath has nothing to do with the act of leaving.

The future is already written, but he cannot read it. He can only sense its weight, its texture, and he has to believe that anything is better than this. As his life flashes by on the outside of a fast-moving train, his past dissolves. The small village has dissolved, and the 1800’s are in the past for ever. The hours in the wig factory are gone. He hopes he will no longer feel he must apologise for the act of living. He hopes to shake the sense of being, not a second or third class citizen, but a tenth class citizen—the lowest of the low. His shoulders will straighten. He will learn a new language (‘The Immigrant’ 6).

No doubt, running away from Lithuania as a young man was traumatic for young Jacob. Trying to find his feet in a new land, with no language skills would have been a shock to the system. And being a refugee without any high-level skills was hardly a bonus.

Already at the beginning of The Immigrant as I wrote I could see that there were whispers linking lives together across generations. These whispers were fashioned out of heartbreak and trauma and loss, but it would be impossible to say that this was passed down through repeated stories, nor would anyone be able to identify exactly how these elements might have been transferred to future generations.
One of the most confounding revelations in my practice-led research came towards the end of writing the book. I was contemplating how, when I had first arrived in America from South Africa, in Milwaukee Wisconsin, trying to escape a violent South Africa, I had immediately contracted asthmatic bronchitis. It was now 2014 and I was writing about this time in Milwaukee, and as I wrote, I thought about Bee’s mother Ethel, who had died of pneumonia not far from Milwaukee, in Hammond Indiana, leaving Jacob too poor to care for his two children and eventuating in them being sent off to the Jewish Orphan Home in Cleveland, Ohio. I wondered why, when I had first walked through the town of Milwaukee, I hated the buildings, especially the university where my husband had enrolled to do a doctorate. How could architecture make me feel like I was suffocating? I had said repeatedly to my husband Paul, ‘I feel like I died here.’

Then, for some inexplicable reason, late in 2014, I decided to look online for pictures of the Jewish Orphan Home, Bellefaire.

When I put the picture of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee next to the picture of the Jewish Orphan Home, I found something astonishing:

The Milwaukee-Downer ‘Quad’ 2009
The two buildings are architecturally similar and look like they could be twins.

No doubt there are variations in each of the buildings, but essentially, there is a sameness, a theme. There was absolutely no identifiable reason back then, when I first saw the university building, why it should have had such a negative impact on me. I had never seen a building like it before. And yet, every time I arrived at the university, I felt my chest constrict and I had to fight physically to breathe. I was soon diagnosed with sudden asthmatic bronchitis, but to me the not-being-able-to-breathe-situation seemed entirely related to place. It took me a year to learn how to see the building without feeling suffocated.

Practice-led research, I thought initially, would generate new ideas on creating an innovative biographical memoir. I never imagined what it would reveal. I thought I was living my own life. But had I inherited Bertha’s traumatic life-memory of her mother dying from not being able to breathe? Was the experience of young orphan Bertha staring up at the austere building that would be her new home somehow written into my genes, so that the moment I looked on a similar building, I felt like I was suffocating?
Luckily, I did not have to answer those questions. They are, after all, impossible to explore, except through narrative and metaphor. I did, though, thoroughly question our general and limited view of the nature of memory, and the isolated perception we have of ourselves, our choices, and our experiences, as being uniquely individual. Perhaps each one of us is part of a much more intricately connected web that links us to our forebears and their lives.

My trauma in Milwaukee, perhaps, wasn’t mine alone. The only way to explore it though, was to link events in the book to each other using the skills and craft I would employ in fiction: I could use those skills to uncover the subtle fabric of intergenerational motifs.

Collective trauma is passed down to individuals in multifarious and refracted ways…trauma, with its concomitant strategies of survival, becomes a chronic condition…And then there are those afflicted by what Freud calls Schicksalsneurose, that is, a ‘fate neurosis,’ who seem to be living under a bad spell, haunted by a curse that often preceded their lives, an ancestral curse perhaps, hidden and intangible, relegated to secrecy and silence (Schwab 2006, p. 1).

Although I would not go so far as to say that I was living under an ‘ancestral curse’, the echoes of the past in my life were uncanny.

I discovered that I had traced, exactly in reverse, Bertha’s journey: at 22, in the late 1930s she left the Midwest, took a ship to England, then another to South Africa, where she married my grandfather Phil, who was 32. At 22, in the early 1990s, I left South Africa with my husband Paul who was 32, flew to London and then on to the Midwest in America.

I spent two years living and struggling to breathe on the edge of Lake Michigan. The Jewish Orphan home in Cleveland Ohio was just on the other side of the same lake.

The journey of turning historical facts into a creative work was well underway.

As I read the hundreds of letters written to Bertha over many decades, a picture of her young and then older self emerged. It was uncanny to have voices speaking to her, but no record of a single thing that she thought or felt. Her own voice was entirely silent. I felt that her character was tenuous at best. I was disturbed and wanted to make this work authentic, but all I could do was write the space around the central character and hope that some impression of her young self would emerge.
At this point, I spoke to my uncle Woody in Israel. Thirteen years younger than my
dad, he had spent a lot of time as a young adult taking care of Bertha, his mother. I
sent him a copy of the manuscript thus far. He called and told me that she came across
in the book as quite timid, when in fact, she was known for being the life and soul of
the party. Then he said:

‘Shell, I have all her diaries from the moment she left New York on the SS
Berengaria, to after your dad was born in 1941. I could scan and send them to you.
Would that help? Do you want them?’

Did I? I could hardly speak.

The first pages came through and I felt like an intruder, a time-traveller. I stared at her
young, uneven scrawl, page after page. I wept.

The astonishing thing was, she wrote as if she meant to be read. As if she
knew there was a reason for documenting her life. She kept all these letters and wrote
this diary, as if according to some agreement. It felt as though she was writing to me.

Sitting there on the floor in my living room surrounded by letters to her and the scans
from her diary on my laptop, I wanted to whisper to the space around me,
‘don’t worry, Granny Bee. I’ve got it all, finally. You kept everything so beautifully. I see
your life and your struggles, and I treasure how you’ve recorded everything.’

Aside from Woody, I was the only person as far as I know, to have read her
words.

‘The Veld is very lonely at night,’ she wrote after her wedding. I could feel the
full impact of that statement, knowing Africa, knowing America, knowing the price
you pay when you pull your soul out by the roots and go to a foreign country, and it
isn’t what you thought it would be.

I had done this and suffered in a similar way. Milwaukee, USA in the middle
of an icy winter where temperatures were 30 below zero, was a lonely place to land
for a South African 22-year-old with no way of making money in a country that did
not seem to have space for my young self. I understood her immigrant distress.

She wasn’t the only one in our family, though, who recorded her thoughts in a
diary. When I was twelve, at the beginning of 1982, I bought my first diary. I told
Woody then, that I was planning to write in it everyday.

‘You’ll do it for a few weeks,’ he laughed. ‘Then you’ll give up.’
It’s 2015, and I’m still doing it.

Granny Bee and I. I did not know that we were similar in any way. As a child I was a barefooted tree-climber who delighted in terrifying my poor grandmother by clambering up to high branches and dangling from the ends of them until she told me to get down or she’d have a heart attack. She seemed civilised and proper and I felt wild. And yet as I grew older we would both document our lives…but it seems, for different purposes. I wonder at the purpose of journaling; I sense each person who keeps a diary does it for unique reasons. For me, the only imagined audience is myself…I write because the process enables a dual self: writer, and reader. Each day connects me to the previous days, and on and on, back through time. I feel that Bertha wrote to be found, to be seen and understood; to have her journey recognised, so that all her struggles and connections with her past would not disappear into oblivion, but would live on, at the very least in the hearts and memories of those who came after her.

I became, in my reading of Granny Bee’s diaries, and in my own writing and creating in *The Immigrant*, acutely aware of the paradox of naming anything ‘fiction,’ or ‘non-fiction.’ I was also unsettled. As I read her words, and integrated those and all the letters into the story as best I could, she came alive. I could hear her speaking to me through time, in some non-physical space where she was still young, her words still new. Her American accent (which she had all her life) was still so clear to me since I’d had the good fortune of being with her in the world until I was twenty-eight. I knew that I was telling a true story. But I was also re-imagining everything. The certainty that I was being an ‘authentic’ biographer began to crumble.

The line dividing fiction from non-fiction could be regarded as a tenuous one. Judith Barrington, British-American poet and memoir writer writes about this:

…the line between these two genres is not always clear. Not every- thing in a memoir is factually accurate: who can remember the exact dialogue that took place at breakfast forty years ago? And if you can make up dialogue, change the name of a character to protect his privacy, or reorder events to make the story work better, then how is it different from fiction? (Barrington 2007, p.110).

Barrington goes on to state that the ‘real’ difference between memoir/biography and fiction, is an unspoken contract or agreement between the author and reader. With
memoir, the understanding is: this really happened. With fiction, the understanding is: the author made this up (Barrington 2007, p. 110).

In her unpublished Master’s thesis ‘An informed and ignorant readership—the contradictions of creative non-fiction’ Oregon State University graduate Lani Rush explores the tension between the two words ‘creative’ which implies making things up freely, and ‘non-fiction’ which implies presenting facts to the readership (Rush, 2014). She concludes that readers still need to learn to read memoirs, not as a fact sheet, a blow-by-blow account reality byte, but as emotionally true. This is in contradiction to self-proclaimed non-fiction Guru Lee Gutkind who draws a firm and unambiguous line between fiction and creative non-fiction in his book You Can’t Make This Stuff Up (2012).

‘Creative’ doesn’t mean inventing what didn’t happen, reporting and describing what wasn’t there. It doesn’t mean that the writer has a license to lie. The cardinal rule is clear—and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader—the maxim we live by, the anchor of creative nonfiction: ‘You can’t make this stuff up!’ (Gutkind, 2012, p. 222?).

An opposing view is explored by author Vivian Gornick who writes in a magazine article ‘A Memoirist Defends her Words’:

To state the case briefly: memoirs belong to the category of literature, not of journalism. It is a misunderstanding to read a memoir as though the writer owes the reader the same record of literal accuracy that is owed in newspaper reporting or in literary journalism. What the memoirist owes the reader is the ability to persuade that the narrator is trying, as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the experience at hand. (Gornick, 2003).

Gornick’s idea is, I believe much more honest and less misleading than Gutkind’s. I can say this because of my own disconcerting insight on memory that emerged as I wrote The Immigrant: after more than thirty years of journal-keeping, I am all too aware of how our memories lie, or reconstruct events even soon after they happen, so that even documenting things a day later is a narrative choice, a selection of certain moments over others. And in that selection, there is the knowledge that those moments not favoured with selection vanish into oblivion. In that void, we create stories that connect events, which may or may not be ‘true.’ I have read back on instances I wrote about twenty-five years ago and been astonished, because my current memory of those events is a different story altogether. We strive for truth, emotional, factual, as we write non-fiction. And yet, unless we have video evidence of
an event, the reality of any moment in the past is open to the interpretations, creations and re-creations of those recalling or recording those instances.

Considering both the conscious and unconscious selection of events, I was challenged also on my own moral/ethical grounds: in writing about Bertha and Phil her husband, and all the writers of the letters, and in trying so hard to do justice to their lives as I invented scenarios and dialogue, was I not, in fact, no matter how closely it attempted to mirror historical truth, erasing their true selves from any living memory? On the one hand, I had the sense that the writing of the memoir/biography was giving new life to people loved and lost, but I was also acutely aware of how the writing was an over-writing of real events and lives. However, because I had access to hundreds and hundreds of letters, it is fair to say that most of the events I wrote about emerged in the narrative in the correct historical order in which they happened.

In terms of internal states of being, one cannot always tell from a letter or diary entry precisely what the mood or psychological space of the writer was, but for me, using minimalism and not over-explaining the emotional lives of the characters, I found a way to write ‘reality’ as closely as was possible.

When I wrote my memoir *The Eye of the Moon* (Davidow 2007) I found that it was almost impossible to by-pass my re-invention of situations and get back to the true picture of how things really happened. The same possibility emerges in the creation of *The Immigrant*. As the characters come to life on the page, as I create these realities, it is possible that I am dissolving their truth by my re-invention of my late relative’s lives. And yet, in every word that I wrote, I attempted to stay as close to the truth within the letters and diary entries as possible.

In *The Immigrant*, Bertha Frank is escorted around London with a young man heading to New Zealand. His name is Gainor Jackson and it’s clear that they like each other very much. When Bertha finally leaves London after a long trip for yet another endless journey via ship to Cape Town, South Africa, to meet Phil Davidow, the man she is going to marry, she writes these words, which gave me much food for thought. She has let go of a possible love and now has to put all her dreams and hopes in the potential relationship she will have with the husband she has never met:

February 11 1938
…Mr Jackson escorted me to the train and saw that I was alright. The scenery was lovely, green grass of fields. Homes built close together. So I bid London goodbye for my next voyage to S. Africa where I hope and Pray my future will hold happiness, health and a beloved husband-to-be Phillip Davidow waiting for me…
March 3
Ship delayed. Will leave boat tomorrow. Phillip walking the decks waiting to see me.

March 4
At last. Africa.
Excited when I met Phillip. He has a nice smile. Uncle Wolf is adorable. Spent the day with Phil in Cape Town. It’s a lovely city. Table Mountain is spectacular…on train to Johannesburg. Feeling very blue.

March 5
On train second nite. I am actually beginning to fall in love with Phillip. He is very sweet (‘The Immigrant’ 100).

The connection with Gainor Jackson lasted a lifetime. My dad said to me on the phone, ‘he was heading to New Zealand and he wanted her to go with him. Obviously she declined, but in some way she must have wanted to. They exchanged Christmas cards until he died in the 1990s.’ The last Christmas card was from his wife to Bertha, telling her of his death.

In the above diary extract Bertha reviews her journey and mentions Harold Feldman. Reading between the lines, ‘Had a wonderful time with Harold whom I like very much,’ and ‘Spent most of the day with Harold. Promised we would be shipmates forever’ there is the sense that Bertha was so very young, so ready to fall in love, first with Gainor, then with Harold. Referring to both this and the previous extract, it was clear to me that since she had already promised herself to Phil, she could not entertain thoughts of anyone else. There was, however, a weakness there, and I wanted to reveal it in the text. The simple line ‘Feeling very blue,’ holds much
weight against the later, ‘I am actually starting to fall in love with Phillip.’ It appears as a revelation of her delicate hope juxtaposed against the devastating loss of home. The foreignness of having arrived in colonial Southern Africa highlighted the enormity of that loss as well as her almost desperate romantic desire for Phil to be the love of her life.

In writing about Bertha’s first arrival in Cape Town, and the long train trip up to the then-Transvaal, I attempt to capture these complexities…the loneliness of Africa, the foreignness, the necessity of falling in love with the man whose marriage proposal she has accepted and who has paid for her trip out:

At first the landscape is mountainous. Quaint Cape Dutch houses with their gabled walls and whitewashed exteriors from the seventeenth century catch the rays of the setting sun as the train leaves the populated areas. The further they travel north, the more sparse the landscape becomes. Eventually, evening falls and the train hits the Karoo desert. There is nothing but sand and scrub as far as the eye can see. It’s so dry Bertha tastes the dust. Darkness descends quickly. She’s amazed at how rapidly all the colours fade to blue, then black. There is no sign of human habitation.

Sitting in the train compartment, the bunks folded down so as to make a comfortable couch, Bertha feels her heart sink.

It’s when the conductor comes in and asks for their tickets in a foreign language, and Phil speaks back to him in the same rough tongue that sounds like German to her ears.

- Alle kaartjies asseblief. All tickets please.
- Hierso, meener.
- Baie dankie meener, mevrou.
- Goodness, Phil, what language is that? She’s stepped into another universe. The emptiness of the Karoo, the strange sounds of an incomprehensible tongue, her new life…suddenly the weight of what she’s done squeezes her heart.
- Are you alright, darling?
- I’m sure I am. Just a minute. Maybe I need a glass of water.
- Gee, Bert, darling, you gave me a fright. Your face went so pale for a moment. It’s time for dinner anyway. Give me your hand, my beautiful Bert. Let me treat you to more than a glass of water.

His very being is kindness. He is gallant, caring, devoted. In his eyes she sees the shimmer of disbelief. He saw a snap and fell in love with her image. He had the courage to ask. She had the courage to come. All the way from Ohio to southern Africa. It’s impossibly true. He holds her hand in his as though she is made of the most precious substance in the galaxy. If she did not already love the man who wrote her such letters, she would love him now (‘The Immigrant’ 101).

Through inferences in Bertha’s diary entries, and my own selections, I was writing a ‘true’ story. But in turning truth into art, I began to discover that the line dividing pure fiction from non-fiction was even more of a fallacy than I’d previously thought. Perhaps, I began to think, the only defining element that sets non-fiction apart from
fiction is authorial intention. And my intention was to get as close to the elusive and intangible ‘truth’ of Bertha’s life. In doing so, I, of course, uncovered much more than I bargained for.

After Bertha’s arrival in South Africa and eventually Groblersdal, where she will begin her new life with Phil, she is introduced to an extended family. This delights and confounds her. Phil is one of nine children, and because his younger brother Jack died, he is the baby of the family, adored by his mother and loved possessively by his older sisters. (His sister Dora, of course, is married to Bertha’s blood uncle Woolf, the brother of her late mother Ethel, which is how Phil got Bertha’s photograph and address in the first place).

When Bertha arrives in Groblersdal, her cousin, one of Woolf’s daughters, also named Bertha, is engaged to a young man named Meyer Lourie.

My dad said on the phone to me about Meyer Lourie:

‘He was a motor mechanic at that stage and came to Groblersdal to help out in my dad’s shop. He met my mom and was immediately smitten. He never thought small and was used to getting what he wanted, but my mom said to him that she’d given my dad her word and that was that. So when she married my dad, Meyer moved to Jo’burg, started a farming business and was a ruthless businessman. He had no etiquette and was hard-nosed about everything. He had a family later, but didn’t see much of them. When my mom and dad went to Jo’burg, they sometimes stayed with them, but Meyer was deeply resentful of my dad. Later, when my dad lost everything, Meyer gave him a job in one of his factories, but after a month, my dad quit. He couldn’t stand working for Meyer. Eventually, Meyer began to sell earthmoving equipment and even owned a diamond mine. In the end, though, he lost everything, and died a poor man. You know, I was always wary of him. I found him quite scary. He didn’t suffer fools, that man.’ (Conversation with Bob Davidow, October 2012).

The parallels in the historic narrative were so ironic and complex that in the writing of *The Immigrant* I had to change Meyer Lourie’s name to Joshua, since Meyer Frank was my grandmother Bertha’s brother. Cousin Bertha’s name in *The Immigrant* was changed to ‘Mildred,’ as the story became more and more detailed, and I had to find a way of writing Bertha Frank and Meyer Lourie’s relationship with enough substance and complexity to be believable as a lifetime connection. The name change was a difficult decision that I made en-route to the final editorial process. I kept the original names until the final drafts. I made the decision to change the names of the people who were secondary characters, and about whom I had less factual information anyway. At any rate, I would have preferred to keep the originals (the parallels are
especially interesting), but was advised that for ease of reading, the change was necessary.

It was true, that when Bertha’s baby daughter died, it was Meyer Lourie who made the baby’s coffin. To Phil, Meyer was a hateful obnoxious individual who coveted his wife and begrudged him his position as her husband. In reality it is hard to tell. That Meyer Lourie had a soft side is highly plausible. Whether he would have loved and cherished Bertha is questionable. That he adored her was undeniable. What follows is an extract of the first meeting of the characters Bertha and Joshua Lourie in ‘the Immigrant,’ based only on the preceding conversation with my father:

The only dark cloud in the room is the presence of Joshua, gentle cousin Mildred’s fiance. He skulks in the corners and smokes on the veranda. He paces restlessly about, disdainful of the small talk and petty concerns of the chattering women.

At tea time, Bertha decides that if she doesn’t make a friend out of him quickly, she will surely go away hating him, and that could prove disastrous if they are to be family for the rest of their lives.

She whispers in her cousin Mildred’s ear:
- I’m going to have a word with your fiance. We didn’t get off to a grand start. What does he like to talk about?

Her cousin shrugs. Business, always business. Don’t take it personally if he’s rude, though. She seems resigned to her fate. Resigned to a gruesome life with someone who seems to have no sense of good behaviour at all. Bertha finds the thought quite disgusting. She’s inordinately grateful for Phil.

Bertha saunters out to where Joshua stands on the veranda. She leans against a solid red brick pillar and the sun drenches half of her in yellow light. Her hair is wild and flecked with gold. She is at the height of her beauty, at the height of her power. At this moment, she feels it. Red and pink roses are blooming on a bush just in front of him. The air is full of fragrance.

- Apologies for making you wait earlier, Mr. Lourie. I had a lot of luggage, coming from America and all.

He turns the full force of his gaze on her. She hadn’t noticed before that his eyes were ice-blue, and that the contrast between his tanned face and dark hair was what had perhaps made him seem so fearsome. Her heart pounds for no good reason, and then she’s astounded when he gives her a disarming smile.

- I’m the one who should apologize, he says. I’m not a patient man. Most ordinary human beings would look away, stare at the garden, the strange birds calling joyfully from the sky, but he doesn’t let up. He keeps his eyes fixed on her face. Bertha holds her own.

- So, what’s your line of business, Mr. Lourie?
- for God’s sake, call me Joshua, will you?
- It’s just...we haven’t properly introduced ourselves in a polite way.
- And? I don’t think much of social etiquette.
- Well, I’m sure of that!

He smiles again, unexpectedly and drops his cigarette on the stone veranda, grinding it out beneath his heel.

- I like a woman who can give as good as she gets, he says. Say, you weren’t really interested in knowing what I do for a living, were you?
- No. I was making conversation at the time. But if you’d care to tell me, I’d like to hear it now.
- I’m glad we can be honest with one another. No, I wouldn’t want to bore you. I do this and that. I buy, I sell. I make money. What do you do, Bertha Frank?
  The way he says her name jars her. It’s soft. His gaze is uncomfortably intimate.
- I worked for the May Company Department Store in Cleveland. Now I’m about to be married, and I hope to be a good wife.
- I hope you’re not making a big mistake, Bertha.
- Well that’s not a very nice thing to say.
- No? But it’s the truth. I do hope that. I think you’re an extraordinary woman. You need a strong man, not a love-sick puppy-dog.
- I came here to make friends with you, Mr. Lourie. If you insist on being rude, I’ll leave you now.
- Don’t mistake me, Bertha. This isn’t rudeness. It’s honesty. You’re a ravishing beauty, and a clever girl and I’d hate to see you throw yourself away on someone not worthy of everything you are.
- Well, excuse me! And who would you, who knows everything it seems, imagine to be someone worthy of everything I am? Her tone is angry, more than sarcastic, and she’s not expecting the reply he gives her.
- Me.
  Bertha turns away from him. Her heart is beating so hard she feels sick; she acknowledges failure, bows her head in a curt nod and walks inside. She proceeds to ignore him for the rest of the afternoon and evening. Cousin Mildred is subdued and quiet and says glumly, I told you so. Don’t take anything he said personally. He’s just like that. Rude to just about everyone (‘The Immigrant’ 106).

Practice-led research has led to the discovery that the very nature of writing biography and memoir is complex and that the line dividing fiction from non-fiction can move and shift, or perhaps, radically speaking, doesn’t exist. Perhaps it’s not enough to simply have an unspoken agreement with a reader that ‘this happened,’ because that implies an alignment of the written work with a past ‘reality’ that is potentially very tenuous. This uncomfortable position is a necessary one for a writer of non-fiction to acknowledge. The biggest fallacy is that we are somehow telling the truth. Certainly, I am constructing a truth in ‘The Immigrant,’ and I have aimed for authenticity, but every recount of every event is a narrative construction and I’m suggesting that the only Truth we can aspire to is an emotional truth, the kind of truth that appears in all lasting works of fiction.

In order to more fully explore the notion of how imagination transposes memory, we need to consider several of the following. First, there's what Philip Gerard calls ‘the truth of event.’ Then there's the ‘aesthetic’ truth that Fern Kupfer refers to. And in Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art, Judith Barrington quotes Mary Clearman Blew as saying that ‘I struggled for a long time with the conflicting claims of the exact truth of the story and the emotional truth as I perceived it (Steinberg 1999, p. 144).

In that sense, the landscape, and those characters live in the same realm as fictional constructions. They are, despite all resources, the result of imagining and re-creating.
I know also as a fiction writer that the biggest myth is that something is completely ‘made up.’ In novels I have written, I have found in retrospect that they are far truer than I would ever have imagined at the outset. I have attempted to write a piece, to create character and dialogue based on real events, but even as I strove for that loaded word ‘authenticity,’ I was aware that authenticity implies some kind of objective truth or reality, which is impossible to establish.

Practice-led research as a methodology has had a far-reaching series of effects on how The Immigrant evolved. It lead me into the tangled past of my family, enabled me to have conversations with people who have now passed away.

In fact, had I waited two years longer to begin this project, it would have been a very different journey. Mike has since passed away, and my dad died just as I was nearing the end of the book.

The methodology highlighted the issues surrounding the writing of fiction and non-fiction, and it lead to a deep exploration of the central motif or theme, ‘a whispering in the blood,’ which could fall loosely under the term ‘transgenerational memory.’

Transgenerational Memory

My praxis led me to the realisation that my life, my choices were more closely connected to the lives of my forebears than I’d ever imagined. I’d previously assumed that the past and present were two separate entities, connected by love (perhaps) and memory. I did not imagine that something deeper might run through generations and tie them to each other in profound and inexplicable ways.

Memory is a complex concept and broadly speaking, can include experiences from previous generations. The discussion of how the transmission of trauma from parents to children transpires is highlighted in findings by Dekel and Goldblatt, who discuss the impact of trauma on the sons of war veterans, and demonstrate that the more severe the exposure to unspeakable events, the greater the impact on a child, and that parental behaviour and society’s handling of current and post-war events, for example, can significantly impact the next generation:

…intergenerational transmission takes place not only as a result of family mechanisms but is also affected by mechanisms and processes that operate in society at large (Dekel and Goldblatt 2008, p. 3).
Marianne Hirsch discusses the transmission of traumatic holocaust memories by survivors to younger generations, which often happens indirectly through photographs, stories, and even the silence of the affected generation, so that the generation post-holocaust, she says, can carry a ‘post-memory’, a phenomenon worthy of exploration:

And yet postmemory is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it, rather, as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove (Hirsch 2008, p. 3).

More than that, extreme trauma can alter genes that are then passed down to future generations and manifest in people as anxieties, who may have no living memory of such trauma. Neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky and his team have written extensively on how prolonged and extreme stress alters genes, which are then passed on to future generations (Sapolsky, Romero, and Munck 2000, p. 100).

Dispositions, too have a heritable factor: talents in music, mathematics, languages, the arts are well-known to run in families and although this has been the subject of controversial discussion, it seems to be that talent has a bio-physiological (neurological) aspect to it that isn’t easily refutable (Howe, Davidson, and Sloboda 1998).

But what of other, subtler dispositions? For want of a better term, what of ‘soul’ dispositions, like having a soft heart, or not having much luck with money despite one’s best efforts, or being able to speak a foreign language fluently very easily, despite having no obvious family history of the language? Or having an experience of the world that seems to belong to someone else in the family, despite the fact that there is no genetic or explicit connection? What of the potential transference through generations of motifs or themes?

This is the territory of story.

In writing *The Immigrant* within the broad context of practice-led research, I discovered a way of revealing the nature of memory and potentially inherited dispositions, as well as the emergence of intergenerational motifs, so that I could explore these elements in a manner fitting for a creative work.

Memory in general relates to the retention or recollection of things, people, events. This retention and recollection can happen, it appears, even in an individual not
directly affected by an event or impression. The intergenerational effect of trauma has been well documented; the long-lasting impact of stress can be passed down through generations. Marianne Hirsch (2002) in an article ‘Marked by Memory’ discusses the physical and metaphorical bequeathing of scars from mother to daughter: trauma, she explains, means ‘wound,’ and in talking about the passing down of traumatic experiences, she highlights the distinction between ‘re-memory’, the act of recreating a memory of trauma by a daughter, to ‘post memory’, the after-effect of the memory on succeeding generations. In the passing down of trauma, the subsequent generation, or daughter, or granddaughter even, recreates the trauma, the wound, and carries it like a mark that states: I am you, but I am also not you. Through this wound, the generations are profoundly connected (Hirsch 2002, p. 88).

Hirsch’s ‘post-memory’ refers in the main to those born to holocaust survivors who are themselves affected by the traumatic experiences of their parents. Her term refers to the second-generation memories of holocaust descendents who either by virtue of hearing parent stories or living in a household with parents who had post-traumatic stress disorder after the holocaust, exhibited many of the symptoms of PTSD, as if the trauma itself was passed along to the next generation. (Hirsch 2008). In my case, there is a degree to which this term may apply. I am tracing, in the writing of *The Immigrant* an inherited memory of lives lived on other continents, by other generations, connected to me through blood, through sensitivities and inherited dispositions; a story with a deep connective tissue profoundly linking family members and generations, dissolving time.

According to my research, for the past hundred years at least, my family on my father’s side has been on the move, prompted by persecution, poverty, and the need to escape a country or a continent for one reason or another.

As I read through all the letters in my possession, I became aware of some kind of repetitive factor playing itself out over generations, and this awareness may be rooted in the simple fact that I am a writer and thus perhaps more prone than others to viewing the world and events through a focused narrative lens.

There is no doubt that narratives help readers and writers contextualise and elucidate the lived experience (Baumeister and Newman 1994). Writers are prime examples of this, as explicit story-makers, and I do acknowledge that at our most
fundamental social and psychological levels human beings are fine-tuned to make meaning even out of meaningless things.

Having said that, Bertha’s life story, her parent’s lives, and the echoes of so many factors in my own life revealed themes and motifs that I experienced as neither random nor artificial...I wove these elements into a narrative that did not seem to need much in terms of ‘constructing’ correlations. I saw in the journeys and lives of my forebears, impulses, fears, dreams and longings that I thought were mine. I felt less like a ‘constructor’ and more like a ‘revealer,’ as though I’d uncovered a code, a ‘whispering in the blood’ passed down through generations.

It is this ‘whisper’, or code, that I wish to explore in terms of transgenerational memory. It is a broader and altogether more subtle concept than identifiably transferred behaviours or memories.

Being a creative writer, not a geneticist or historian, the only way I imagined I might properly explore this ‘whispering’ was through metaphor.

I discovered many things about metaphor through the act of writing and researching. Practice led me to research, and research then informed my practice.

During this time, I did not know that Uncle Mike would die soon after our reconnection, and that our last letters would be frozen in time, a moving summation of his long life and a final connection I could treasure which would never have happened had I not undertaken this research. The timing was everything. It touched him that his sister was being thought about, written about; that her struggles, her quest across the world would have the smallest chance of not vanishing into nothing. Likewise, in my conversations with my dad, something precious emerged, and we did not know then how limited our time was and how we were creating a memory, embedding ourselves into our own narrative during this ‘practice-led research.’ He was relieved to be able to pass on his mother’s letters; he was also inspired to remember, to talk about things in his childhood; to discuss his mother, and to share some of his feelings about his past. I did not know at the very beginning of writing the book why the violin was significant. It emerged as a motif without me consciously constructing it. It crept in while I was unaware and while I was musing on Jacob and what he might have carried with him on his person when he escaped Lithuania.

His jacket is threadbare and the cold creeps in tightening around him. He holds a worn leather bag in which he keeps small parts of his soul, and the memories of people left behind. Across his back he carries a gift from someone loved and lost: the
violin given to him by his father. All that is musical within him is held together in the case wrapped with string so that it doesn’t fall apart (‘The Immigrant’ 6).

My conversations with my Dad allowed him to go back into the past and emerge with memories long buried. The following extract was based on a supposedly forgotten memory of my father’s, which he only recalled when I asked him what he remembered about his very early childhood. South Africa was indeed wild and untamed when he was a toddler. Bertha was a young American from the city of Cleveland Ohio, and this recollection revealed the incongruity of her existence as a naive foreigner in Africa, not armed with the already intuitive sense for danger that her son, my father had, and that those of us born on that often merciless continent all seemed to inherit.

In the golden elephant grass behind them, loud hissing noises emerge from time to time. Bee glances over her shoulder, but then turns her attention back to peeling a boiled egg for Bobby.

- I want to go home, Bobby says. His eyes dart in the direction of the hissing sound and back to his mother’s oblivious face. To be born in Africa means to be able to read the land and the air and the sounds that travel, and to know their language.

When his whines eventually compel his mother to pack their things and leave the river, a burst of activity in the long grass behind them finally gives way to a piercing squawk—a wild duck flies skyward in a shower of her own feathers, and a crocodile the size of a canoe launches himself smiling into the deepest part of the slow-moving water (‘The Immigrant’ 180).

In discussions with my father, and in his remembering, we became participants in a looping creative process that tied life to art and art to life. His memory informed my art and my art inspired his memory. Both elements then wove themselves into my life, my own memory, passed down though story, but also through my own creation of that story as ‘memoir.’

Even as The Immigrant traced the physical, emotional and spiritual journeys of five generations of immigrants; the research and writing and uncovering of memories created bonds of love that elicited a parallel journey, of heartbreak and loss and another ocean-crossing in 2014; one in which a final living connection with Africa would end with my father’s tragic death from motor-neuron disease in April of 2014.

In discussing the idea of a transgenerational memory, one which transcends previous definitions, I can only ask a reader to imagine there is indeed a code; perhaps it’s metaphorical, but perhaps, as discussed earlier there are sociological and genetic aspects to it…but imagine that you are indeed part of a narrative arc that goes back
into the preceding centuries; imagine that motifs and themes emerge, which, when uncovered, impact your own life in a profound way. Imagine then, how you might set out to uncover this code: you could of course, look at the inherited traumas passed down through families and trace certain behaviours back through generations; you might cite Marianne Hirsch’s ‘Post-Memory’ (2008) and call this kind of memoir-writing exactly that. Or, you might look at genetic dispositions and uncover the fact that a high proportion of Johannesburg Ashkenazi Jews had genetic and inherited heart disease known as familial hypercholesterolemia (Seftel et al. 1989). (My grandfather Phil, most of his eight siblings, his father and my own Dad suffered from heart disease…most of them died of it). I don’t know whether they all suffered from familial hypercholesterolemia, but it’s quite possible given their location and the large number of family members affected by heart disease.

So, you could be forgiven for coming up with the idea that a human being is just a summation of inherited dispositions passed down through generations, resulting in choices and decisions that influence an individual’s bearing in the world. And that context provides the rest of the picture. That would be an empirical approach.

Or, you could decide, much as I did, that while these factors are interesting aspects of the idea of an inherited disposition, there are subtle and intangible factors—dreams, myths, elements of dreams and myths that cannot have an empirical root cause, that live in the realm of metaphor, apprehended by ‘soul’, and which ask for a less definitive and more open-ended exploration of a numinous territory against which these other elements play themselves out.

Though The Immigrant is as true to the facts of people’s lives as it could possibly be, given the information that exists, it is still a creation. The truth of a story, I’ve learned as both a fiction and a memoir writer, lies in a writer’s ability to convey an imagined reality and ‘truth’ with sufficient power to transport or transform a reader.

And so, this story is a creation, as well as a remembering of events by me, by others; but it may or may not be a true account of the way things actually happened. Even the memory of my own life is a creation of some kind, and each event would be remembered slightly differently by any other individual participating in that moment. Perhaps the only truth of a moment is the one brought about by an observer, or a recounter, and that means that there are many possible realities, or truths of any given moment in time. I feel most comfortable with this picture.
As I immersed myself in the letters, and re-imagined the lives of previous generations with as much ‘truth’ to subject matter as possible, I decided to keep the story tied to its dates; to use letters and diaries to make sure the characters’ own words were recorded as accurately as possible; to keep original names as far as possible. Bertha’s diary seemed to be written in a way that suggested she anticipated a future reader; she bore witness to her own life and created a living trans-generational memory that would be passed down, she hoped, to those who might understand.
This is a summation of four years on one page. 1938: Bertha maps the distance between January 1, 1937 and a house party with a ‘Mr Albert Legow,’ and January 1, 1939 where she spends the day ‘In South Africa with my husband Philip listening to Opera records.’ The next entry is in 1941. Bob, my father must be two, since he was born in 1939. Her tone is that of someone talking to a stranger, a reader not intimate with her life, her family: ‘Three years have past and I can hardly believe it I have the dearest little boy, Bobbie.’

As I read her diaries, they provided the exact information I required to move on in the writing of *The Immigrant*. I was lost without her voice and she gave it to me; I needed clarification of what was taking place; I wanted to know what she thought and felt when she arrived in Africa and she presented it all in the richest way. In light of that, this diary entry from 1938 captures the essence of the young woman on the boat going into a world she could not imagine:

February 20, 1938.
Have been sailing now close to three weeks on my long journey (from London) to Africa. The sea is a lovely deep green color and the sky blue and the white clouds make beautiful pictures to the imagination but it’s real.

February 21, 1938.
Sat on deck, fell asleep wondering what the new world holds in store for me (‘The Immigrant’ 95).

Bertha’s memories of her travels and of her long ago childhood in the orphanage were passed down to her children orally throughout their lives. Her diaries and her letters came to me after the fact…when I had already begun to write about her and did not know they existed.

By far the most powerful element in this practice-led research exercise was the emergence of the threads that were unwritten, unspoken and unknown until I discovered them, that existed in an ethereal shared warp of space-time: the motif of the violin running through all our lives; my asthma in Wisconsin in 1992 and Ethel, my great-grandmother’s death in Indiana in 1927 from pneumonia; the similar facades of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and the Jewish Orphan Home in Ohio and my panic-stricken reaction to what would certainly be an ordinary building to anyone else; my discovery (in 2013) through Great Uncle Mike’s writing that the organist at the Jewish Orphan Home had played Handel’s Largo for Bertha’s graduation in the early 1930s, (when she was 16) at the exact moment that my 15-year-old son Tim (an
organist) was learning the Largo at school; the fact that my journey out of Africa was an entirely unwitting mirror of my grandmother’s journey to Africa in reverse which both of us undertook at age 22, she in 1938 and I in 1992.

And then there are the soul-dispositions of generations of men: soft-hearted Jacob who could never rise above his poverty and suffered all his life; soft-hearted Phil whose heart gave in because of the stress of trying to pull himself and his family to financial safety; my soft-hearted father whose generosity almost undid him and saw him lose everything to bankruptcy. These and more, are elements that cannot be subsumed in the context of inherited genetic traits, or those passed down either consciously or unconsciously by others. They exist on their own, like the after-effects of the Big Bang…in the static of an untuned radio station, or, in this case, in the rippling echoes of the souls of my forebears in the world…and because the word ‘soul’ is best off used as a metaphor for the expression of self in the world, the ‘whispering’ in the blood of the lives of Jacob, Ethel, Bertha and Robert and this writer, appears in The Immigrant as a series of motifs and themes.

Creating The Immigrant was the construction of a memory, a truth; a story in which lives are immortalised, and in which characters will forever be there, accessible through their own words, and through my words re-animating their world of long ago. When I immersed myself in letters written in the last century on other continents, the voices of people long dead were given a raw immediacy and in a sense, new life. The experience of reading letters written on paper in 1937 by people who would become my forebears was deeply moving and unsettling. As I read, the memories of stories my grandmother had told me suddenly had dimension; but much more than that: the young selves of relatives I’d known only as old people, or not at all because they had died before I was born, leapt from the pages and their lives and hopes and dreams were once again as new and fresh as the moment their pens put experience into words on paper. And I could look into the past and know who would die and how and where, and I felt like a time-traveller stepping back into our collective transgenerational family memory like an arrogant intruder…because the present reader exists in the future of these past people’s lives; the present reader is alive, knows the futures, and believes possibly at some childish level, that the potential of disappearing forever from living memory only belongs to others—especially those who have already passed on.
In light of Hirsch’s ‘post-memory’ and matrilineal trauma, I think of my grandmother’s wounds: the emotional trauma of losing her mother…the trauma of losing her daughter, the trauma of being a poor Jew in America and then being beaten up as a privileged white in South Africa. In the act of writing about her, in the act of re-creating her wounds, I am attempting to re-imagine, or to be, a voice, an agent of transmission across time and generations, for a particular purpose. Hirsch states:

In casting daughters as agents of transmission and through them opening the space of remembrance beyond the line of family, such a practice of post-memory, particularly, can become an ethical and political act of solidarity and perhaps agency, on behalf of the trauma of the other (Hirsch 2002, p. 88-89).

In terms of memory and the transmission of trauma, there is a traditional belief in some parts of Southern Africa, that the spirit of a departed ancestor who has not worked things out properly in the world, can attach itself to a living descendant and live vicariously, all the while trying to right an old wrong or find peace when there was none. This information was revealed to me by my sister Amy Davidow, a psychologist, who in her work in South Africa on trauma was privy to a lot of Indigenous beliefs and customs, which have not made any kind of foray into mainstream awareness. And although this belief may sound far-fetched to the western reader, to me it seems to say very similar things to what we see in science and biology, and is a powerful metaphor for a subtle transgenerational ‘whispering in the blood’ that I have tried to illuminate through motif in The Immigrant.

Amy told me what she knew about this belief only after I’d revealed to her the uncanny experience of finding that the façade of the orphanage and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee were echoes of each other. For me, when she told me about the attached ancestor, I felt I could find metaphorical truth: when I first arrived in Wisconsin and could not breathe, and looked at this University building that for no apparent reason represented death to me, I felt I was both my grandmother Bertha feeling the loss of her own mother as she looked at the building of her new home, and also I was Ethel, her mother, a ghost watching a child without a mother have to make her way in a cold world. These experiences translate well into fiction, but of course bringing such themes into non-fiction is risky work, because of the issue of verification.
Immersion

Immersion Theory in *The Immigrant* is related to acculturation and enculturation on many levels: as mentioned before, the immersion in the ‘voice’ of another time; the characters’ immersion in new countries with new languages and the role language (or lack of it) plays in the immigrant experience or the ability to be flexible and adaptable to new situations. Immersion in an ‘other’ (language/culture/time) results in an increased capacity to empathise with that ‘other’ so that it becomes intimate knowledge and eventually, part of an expansive ‘self.’

Voice is the defining feature of a creative writing work, and as such, is unique to the narrator. In writing ‘The Immigrant’ the same processes that are at work when we learn a foreign language come into play; the voices of the characters emerged from their letters and after weeks of being immersed in another time, immersed in the realities and cadences of long-dead voices in other countries and other generations, the result when I began to write is that I could easily ‘find’ the voice of those characters, sometimes by using actual words they’d used in their letters, and sometimes by simply creating dialogue in the same style, reflecting who they were and when they lived.

In my work I had to recreate scenes that had once transpired. The facts were there, and I strove for authenticity, yet I was aware that at any moment I might be guilty of appropriation: I was, after all, using real people, real events and often real words, whilst constructing the context, the detailed dialogue and characters much as a fiction-writer would.

Being immersed in the actual ‘voices’ of these people led me to explore the idea of immersion, not just in a foreign language, but in a foreign ‘voice’ and culture, as another off-shoot of practice-led research.

Immersion Theory stems from studies done over the long-term, after an emergence in the 1960s in Canada of French immersion programs in schools for children whose home language was English (Johnson and Swain 1997), in which children were taught in the language of immersion (French) and developed bilingually. Over time, the research showed that children who learned two languages effectively learned two ways of seeing the world, two ways of expressing things, and
appeared to have a wider ranging capacity to think flexibly than monolingual children in the long term. (Cummins 1998).

As someone who learned to speak three languages in addition to English as a child in South Africa (Zulu, Afrikaans, German and a smattering of Sotho), I was well-aware of how immersion in a culture, in a second or third language, allows a learner to absorb not just the linguistic and syntactical elements of a new language, but the ‘soul’ of that language. Embedded in foreign words are the roots of the words, the way those words have been used over time to refer to the elements important for that society. Learning a language by living immersed in that language reveals that there is not a one-to-one relationship between meanings in one language and those in another. Every translation is an approximation. Take the Zulu word ‘ubuntu’, which has no literal translation. ‘Umuntu’ are people, but ‘ubuntu’ means ‘I am because we are; I am because of you’…it is a unifying sense of ‘peopleness.’ Take the word ‘gemütlich’ from German. It means cozy, neighbourly, friendly, but not quite any of those. In the word lies the winter outside, the warmth of family and friends inside, with good food and the nice smells of cinnamon stars and gingerbread. That’s an approximation, of course.

Immersion Theory was first used as a sociological methodology in which immersion in a culture or second language became qualitative research, allowing the researcher to ‘immerse’ him/herself in a culture and setting for a time in order to gain a deep understanding of a subject. Understanding evolves from an in-depth immersion in the written and spoken ‘voices’ of a language group of a people.

When I learned Afrikaans as a young child in South Africa, I learned to see the world through the eyes of the Dutch descendents of Jan van Riebeecck. My own country, painted first through English words, soft, romantic, shaped by the language of poets and dreamers on another continent became another place; Afrikaans was harsh, gutteral, colourful, hilarious.

Some things worked better in one language than in another; insults in Afrikaans were classic. Instead of telling someone to ‘piss off,’ you could say ‘gaan kak in die mielies,’ which is literally, ‘go shit in the corn.’ Afrikaans, as the language of the oppressor in South Africa during Apartheid, could have a chilling effect on the uneducated ears of a soft-hearted new-comer…and yet, Afrikaans was also the first language of millions of Cape Coloured people, who evolved their own dialect, which
reflected their own lives, taking the language of the oppressor which was forced on them, and then changing it so that it reflected their own reality.

The African writer Dambudzo Marechera wrote in English, but his dislocated syntax and re-writing of colonial English in Africa became its own language, in a sense reflecting the dislocation and marginalisation of a colonised people struggling for identity (Marechera 1980). Language then, as an evolving entity, represents the voice of those people speaking and writing in it at a particular time and place in history.

I once heard the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o speak at Wits university when I was just beginning to take an interest in African literature as I writer, and I found it fascinating that he deliberately chose not to write many of his works in English, favouring his native Gikuyu, because it was not possible, he maintained, to convey the intricacies of his experience of culture in a language not his own (Wa Thiong'o 1994).

Living in Africa as a white child, I surely could not understand my continent wholly if I only spoke English and Afrikaans. Lanaguage presupposed a certain reality. Thus, Zulu, which I began to learn when I was seven, was a language of music and drum beats and words so long and connected that they had to tumble out of your mouth in a constant stream of rolling vowels, deep consonants and some clicks. Learning Zulu immersed me in another South Africa, an Africa experienced by the largest African language group in South Africa.

Even small things changed the way I saw the world: take the the number one in Zulu, ‘kunye’, and ten, which in Zulu is ‘ushumi’. To get eleven, you have to add one to ten ‘ushumi nanye’. By the time you get to twenty, you have to say two times ten ‘amashumi amabile’ and to say twenty-one, you add one to two times ten: ‘amashumi amabile nanye’.

To learn an African language as a white child, for me meant to embrace a different kind of Africa, in which all older women were ‘gogo’ (grandmother) all other girls were ‘sisi’ (sister), and every human being was a family member, a brother, a sister, a grandmother, a grandfather. My circle of empathy widened to include anyone who on the street said ‘Sa’ubona, sisi’ (Hello, sister).

Understanding immersion, I wanted to use language in The Immigrant in an immersive way—Yiddish, German, Afrikaans, Zulu, without translation. I understood that from a reader’s point of view, the effect would have been alienating…but this
was intentional: when Jacob arrived in the English speaking world he was immediately alienated by his lack of English. I wanted the reader to experience the isolation of a person suddenly lifted from all that is familiar, armed not even with the basics tools of communication in a new language. When Bertha arrived in South Africa and realised that in order to connect with the Afrikaans-speakers and Sotho and Zulu speakers, she would have to learn the language, it was a shocking and alienating experience.

Aside from her deformity, which is a point of keen interest to native customers, she doesn’t have the capacity to navigate through the sea of foreign languages, the Zulu, Afrikaans and Tswana that wash over her at the counter.

- Sa’ubona! Kunjani. Ngiyafuna…
- Goeie dag, Mevrou. Het julle…?
- Dumela Mma, o tsogile jang? (‘The Immigrant’ 114).

However, because I realised I could not entirely alienate the reader, I mostly added translations, so that the immersive effect could be comprehended from both sides; the side that makes no meaning out of the words, and the side that comprehends exactly what is meant by them. Sometimes, however, it felt important to show how language barriers create significant isolation for new immigrants, even when they are able to converse with a bulk of the population in their first language.

Learning German for me came with sudden ease that had nothing to do with hearing the language around me all my life. It was a foreign language, not heard in the streets in South Africa, as Afrikaans and Zulu (and Sotho and Tswana and other dialects and languages) were. I had an immediate affinity for German from the moment it was introduced to me in my first year at school. The fact that I felt compelled to go to Germany to attain fluency, despite my Granny Bee’s distress, only affirmed what I already knew: I fitted into that language like a hand into a velvet glove. And yet the worldview I had to espouse as a ‘German’ was completely unfamiliar and indeed, uncomfortable to me. In many respects I was in alien territory: the language was cold, harsh, the absolute opposite of English and Zulu. I felt like a wild African self and I did not value most of the things that German culture valued. I did not see the world as delineated by strong social expectations and judgements, exemplified in sentences like ‘das tut Man nicht’ (one doesn’t do that), as in certain behaviours are universally accepted as okay or not okay, such as wearing shorts to the breakfast table (not okay), to calling even very familiar people by their last names.
(very okay): ‘Herr Franz, Sie sind echt mein bester Freund’ (Mr Franz, you are really my best friend).

And so as a white South African girl of Jewish heritage growing up in a multicultural society in a family that had become Christian and adopted a black child, I was used to immersing myself in the voices and positions of others.

When children learn language, words not only function to isolate specific objects and actions, they also serve to reshape biological perception into cultural perception and concepts (Lantolf and Lantolf 2000, p. 199). As a family, our cultural perception was widened through the exposure to the voices and positions of others. We learned each others’ ‘language’ as our perceptions were reshaped.

In fact the ‘othering’ of others was particularly hard for me to understand, given my immersion in several languages and ways of seeing the world. But there was, at that point, for me and for those around me, no understanding of where my affinity for and desire to learn German came from.

Until I began to write *The Immigrant*. And it was then that I discovered, though I must have already known this, that Jacob spoke only Yiddish. And in my extensive research on the origins of the Ashkenazi Jews, it emerged that this group very likely originated in the Rhineland area of Germany in the middle ages, and the language they spoke was German…which evolved into Yiddish over time in the ghettos, through social and cultural oppression. Since the Ashkenazi Jews are racially a distinct and interrelated group, it would be easy to say that I could have been genetically predisposed to feeling at home in the German language. Yiddish was the Eastern European version of Afrikaans…a case of the oppressed taking the language and rewriting it so that it reflected their experience and nuances, making it their own. When I fell into German as though I had grown up with it, perhaps I simply had an open-minded attitude due to previous exposure to language and the timing was right. It seems to be, across the board, that attitude is a far more important motivational factor than the aptitude, when it comes to learning a second or third language (Krashen 1981). But perhaps aptitude is more than a predisposition: perhaps a ‘whispering in my own blood’ had finally found its voice.

Knowing German, having lived in Germany, was a fundamental key in my being able to immerse myself as a writer in the world of my great-grandfather Jacob; the act of re-imagining his life, living into the possible cadences of his and his sisters’
language, whether in Yiddish or when they tried to speak in English or when they misunderstood English, was a direct result of having lived as a ‘German’ as a 15-year-old. I had taken on the language and culture to such a degree over five months, that most people had absolutely no idea that I wasn’t German. I travelled through East Germany to get to Berlin during the years of the Wall and the cold war, and having lived that landscape in the middle of winter, and had German words to describe it, I felt that I could immerse myself in the experience that might have been Jacob’s and convey the linguistic and emotional dislocation he may have experienced when leaving Lithuania as a Yiddish-speaking Jew and arriving as a non-English-speaking refugee in America:

New York is a giant even then; a well-dressed concrete-on-granite promise of a new life. Jacob’s language sits in his throat like rough gravel. He looks at the signs and writing of a new culture that seems simple, sharp and out of reach. The ghosts of the Pogroms have half-drowned already in the freezing Atlantic.

-Your name?
-Jacob.
-Place of birth?
-Sorry?
-Place of birth?
-No.
-Russia?
-No. Yes.
(‘The Immigrant’ 8).

In order to create ‘voices’ in *The Immigrant*, out of real letters written by real people, I felt both like a translator and a creator. I was translating in a very real sense, whilst taking poetic license at every turn. I translated Phil’s voice into dialogue; translated Gert and Arleen’s adult voices into child-like versions of their adult selves. Over months of reading their letters I was immersed in thousands of their words and their lives. When I wrote their dialogue it felt as though I was involved in an extension as much as a creation; I had both absorbed the cadences and word-choices as well as the disposition that may have led to what they said. The measure of this is whether their actual letters jar with my created dialogue in *The Immigrant*, and that judgement will lie with individual readers.

Edwin Honig, a poet and translator, wrote thirty years ago in *The Poet’s Other Voice* that the act of translating involved creating, supplementing and filling in so that the new entity, a translated work, could never be mistaken for a translation:
Implicit in the challenge was the possibility that a good translation could bring what was irreplacable in the original together with what was missing from it (Honig 1985, p. 3).

Immersion Theory as it relates to language is defined as immersing speakers of a foreign language in that language for a period of time so that the new language is acquired instinctively, just as young children learn their mother tongue. The kind of fluency a reader gains from immersing him or herself in other people’s words and lives is a fluency in the essential nature of human experience, and it is as wide as the imagination that enables it.

My creative artefact, *The Immigrant*, is partly an immersion in voices from the last century…but it is also a translation. In ‘Empowering Imaginations’ Greg Dening writes about the power of the imagination in recreating story: ‘Translation is always a transformation. Translation is always an act of imagination’ (Dening 1997, , p. 424).

Through imagination, the voices of the past are transformed, perhaps even more than they are reflected; the artefact becomes an enlargement of lived experiences, and the characters in it are creations as well as reflections of real individual lives.

My research was a process of immersion, but the act of putting words to paper was certainly a kind of translation. The two approaches, immersion in language or voice, and translation, are inextricably intertwined (Robinson 2014).

This idea comes to the fore in the barriers in *The Immigrant* experienced by characters being confronted with foreign languages in new countries of residence, but it is an idea that also applies to the intergenerational ‘translation’ of meaning, of theme and motif. In the assimilation of ‘voice’, I have attempted to create character, to transfer experience, meaning and ‘zeitgeist’. I am passing on cross-cultural knowledge but also cross-generational knowledge of character. The letters included from Gert Fogelson to my grandmother Bertha are two of the many hundreds of examples that will show I used ‘voice’ to create the character of Gert who first meets Bertha at the orphanage. I employed what I instinctively experienced in my own immersion in other languages to assimilate ‘voice,’ just as one would a foreign language.

Many of the characters’ words and dialogue have been taken directly from their letters, or tweaked so slightly that they might have said those things at that time. Embedded in the nuances and words is hopefully something of that time, that place,
those issues and most importantly, that person. My grandmother used the word ‘gruesome’ referring to the sense of humour of certain relatives who had said hurtful things to her. This indicated that the meaning of the word has since evolved or that culturally in America, at that time, this would have been an easy word choice for such a description. Regardless of that, her voice emerged through her diary entries as unique and I was able to create dialogue, which I hope was reflective of that.

Thus the theory of immersing oneself in order to assimilate a new ‘language’ or voice was a distinctive aspect of my practice-led research.

Below is an example of Gertrude’s letter to my grandmother when she first gets the news that Bertha is pregnant in Africa in 1939. Following that is a letter written by Gert in 1940 when she goes presumably from Cleveland Ohio on a trip to New York.

Her character appears focused on superficial things and entirely oblivious to Bertha’s intense life in Africa. Gertrude was a chatterbox, as evidenced in her 1938 letter to Bertha when she found out Bertha was pregnant. ‘…we discussed it for two hours until everyone told us to shush!’ (Letter from Getrude Fogelson 1938).

New York is Gert’s big adventure, but it pales in comparison to Bertha’s. She has not only sailed halfway around the world and become a mother, but has dealt with malaria, tick-bite fever and the million nuances of a complex foreign African landscape and people. The phrase ‘I am in New York for the first time and taking it all in like a country hick,’ must have filled Bertha with nostalgia and also sadness at the fact that Gertrude really had little understanding for the new world her friend was inhabiting:
Dear Bertha,

Am in N.Y. for the first time & taking it all in like a country kid. It is just as exciting & fascinating as I ever anticipated. Wish I could visite here often.

This hotel serves a small but tasty breakfast in the morning. Some city! I saw part of the Fair yesterday, but I'm going again Monday. Was at the Aquarium.

The train ride was terribly long even though it was air-conditioned & modernistic. I always did hate train rides.
The extract below explores the first meeting of Gert and Bert, and how things might have transpired. Much later in life, after the marriages, the children, the death of spouses, Gert writes to Bert and says she does not consider herself to have been one of the fortunate orphans who grew up into a balanced person and mitigated the effects of growing up without the guidance of loving parents.

She circles around the fountain at the entrance leaving tracks in the snow and then creeps back along the wall towards the girl’s wing.

-What are you doing here? It’s dinner time.

A girl whose close-cropped hair and firm jaw make her look like a boy grins at her.

-I might ask the same thing. Who’re you anyway?

-I’m Gert. Gertrude Fogelson. Pleased to meet you. She sticks out her hand.

Her fingernails are dirty. Bertha declines the hand and Gertrude drops it.

-Bertha Frank.

-Nice. Gert and Bert. Don’t you like that? Are you Meyer’s sister?

-Well you have a lot of questions.

-Well, are you?

-Yes I am. How do you know him?

-Everyone knows him. He’s a friendly boy. So you two are new here. Your parents dead?

-My mom.

-I’m sorry.

Bertha looks away from Gert’s inquisitive face and creeps along the wall of the imposing building with its more than eighty front windows.

-What about your dad?

-He’s too poor to take care of us.

-Yeah, well my dad’s dead and mom can’t take care of us either and you have to learn to do the best you can with what you have. C’n I call you Bert?
Sure.

Say, you hear about Captain Hawthorne Gray? He reached the world’s highest altitude ever in a balloon yesterday. Over forty two thousand feet... in Illinois too! Then he had to parachute out at eight thousand feet so he didn’t get some record or other. Imagine that!

- You sure talk a lot.

- Yeah, I know. But it stops me being lonesome. So, what do you think of Captain Hawthorne Gray?

- I don’t care for him.

- No-o! I mean, wouldn’t it be swell to see the world from that high up! I’d love to go up in a balloon, and travel far, far away... see distant lands and all that. You?

- I’m getting cold.

- C’mon. I’ll show you how to get in before anyone notices you’re missing. Avoid punishment at all costs.

Gert reaches out to grab Bertha’s hand, and Bertha shrinks away.

- I don’t have the plague you know!

Bertha tucks her arms into her armpits and hides her hands. But Gert’s quick eyes have already perceived something amiss.

- Did you lose your fingers or something? I guess you’re ashamed. But you shouldn’t be. Show them to me, will you?

Gert has worn her down. Jacob’s daughter sighs and holds out her hands. Her pointer and middle finger on her left hand are tiny, half-size fingers.

- It’s a birth defect, she says. I haven’t lost any fingers. The umbilical cord strangled them when my mother was pregnant, so they didn’t grow.

- I reckon it’s not a defect. I reck’n it sets you apart and makes you special. C’mon, we’d better hurry.

Before Bertha can argue against Gert’s treatise on what makes people special, Gert has her by her deformed hand (The Immigrant 27).

In the following letter written in the 1970s, Gert’s voice is older, wiser, and yet the lack of understanding about life in a South Africa in the midst of a civil unrest and revolutionary sentiment against the white, ruling party, is evident. The questions posed in her letter referring to Bertha’s recent mugging, where Bertha was mugged and beaten almost to death in the foyer of her apartment building, seem naïve: ‘would it be better for you to live elsewhere?...Could you rent a nice room in a classy house someplace?’... as if South Africa at the height of Apartheid is the same as Cleveland Ohio in the mid-1970s and you can move somewhere ‘nice’ where you aren’t outnumbered ten-to-one by a continent of oppressed and dispossessed Indigenous people.
Most of Gert’s letters are trivial, though they mention details such as the cost of a washing machine during the war ($300! Not much different than today!). And the fact that someone who was sent rice as a gift during the war still had to deduct that gift from her rations...i.e., she got nothing extra. Her voice only once sounds soulful and nostalgic, and though all that is left are the sentences below, they allowed me to create a voice in childhood that had the potential to become the person who wrote the letter in adulthood, most likely when Gert was in her mid to late-fifties:
There is a lot in this letter. There are allusions to events that one can only imagine. The line ‘I remember lots of things, Bertha. Some I feel guilty about, in the way kids can hurt each other.’

From conversations with my uncle and my father, I could guess that Bertha was a beauty; the life and soul of any gathering, and that this may have created envy even in her closest friends. It was hard to capture, but I felt it was necessary in the narrative to create a scene around the possible cruelty that Gertrude may have been referencing. I’m convinced she wouldn’t have been cruel in any traditional bullying sense…the two girls adored each other. But I could imagine that as far as competition for men was concerned, the potential for spite, cattiness even, existed. And so the scene when Bert and Gert are out dancing with a young man they both admire began to create itself as the event where some kind of cruelty could have transpired. Bertha’s beauty was undeniable, but so was her deformity.
At home, small shadows darken the brightness of her day. There isn’t enough to eat. It seems that everyone gets more than Bertha at mealtimes.

- You sure could do with a bit of fat on your bones, Gert says enviously as they get ready to go out. You’d better not make Don fall in love with you. I have my eye on him.
- Don can likes whomever he likes, can’t he?
- You saying you like him?
- I might. And then again, I might not.
- You’re driving me crazy, Bert!
- Well, he bought tickets for the both of us, you AND me, to the Mayfair Casino, didn’t he?
- I plan to dance with him all night.
- Good luck!

In the Cocktail Lounge at the Mayfair Casino inside the Ohio Theatre, an art deco nightclub and supper club, Bertha has no idea how many male heads turn her way. But Gert sees it. Despite the loyalty she feels for her friend, the pain of envy proves overwhelming. She goes out of her way to compete, and when it appears that handsome Don is falling for Bertha’s winning smile, Gert prances up to them with two drinks, one in each hand, and says,

- Could you just hold these for a moment, Bert?
  Bertha’s smile falters. She keeps one hand firmly behind her back.

- Oh, do stop being so fussed about your hand. C’mon, Bert!
  Don’s attention is drawn to Bertha’s hand. She flushes in the crimson light…reaches out both hands, takes the drinks and holds them mid-air for a moment. Her eyes are cold. Don sees the elegance of her right hand and the bizarre deformity of the left. Bertha only needs to see the startled look on his face for a fraction of a second. She’s seen his horror. She places the glasses on the floor at his feet and turns her head, tossing her thick hair and gliding out of the room, out of the theatre, into the hot summer night. (The Immigrant 50)

The final part of this letter is an extended rationale on why the alumni of the home (Gertrude included) could not get it together to bring Bertha back to the States for a ‘Homecoming’ gathering of past residents of the class of 1932, Bertha and Gertrude’s graduating class. The fact that Gertrude could not make things happen certainly saddens her. At this stage Bertha has not returned home for approximately forty years. It will take another ten years before she does finally return to the land of her birth.

Using the above letters and stories my grandmother told me about returning after all that time, I tried to capture the right voices in order to make that event as emotionally true as possible. Details, of course, have certainly been lost in translation, but through immersion, other elements, such as references to real events mentioned in past letters and looking at photographs of the JOH have been added that hopefully keep the scene authentic.

In fifty years, the trees along the pathway to the large red brick building have arched over and created a shady tunnel. The cottages are covered with ivy. They seem so
small. The humid summer air is laden with the past and Bee staggers under its weight.

Bert! Bert! It’s us!

She might be forgiven for not recognising the two old women coming towards her. Their bodies are unrecognisable. It’s only when she’s right up close that their faces give them away. Behind the layers of fine lines and the strange hairstyles, she can see them emerging from the past.

Oh my Lord, Gert! Oh Arleen. You look just the same!

Oh Bert, how do you do it? Look at her, Gert. Not even a wrinkle.

Ladies, we’ve changed, Bee laughs. Gotta face facts. We’re over seventy!

Arleen still stands straight. Her cropped grey hair frames her once-so-familiar face. Gert is heavier than Bee remembers her being, but then again, she realises, so is she. They are like the trees. Willowy, supple youth has been replaced by wide and baryl age. Bee looks at Gert, takes note of her eyes, her smile, the way life has carved her face. Four children, a divorce. Grandchildren.

And Arleen; perhaps she has changed the least. Her eyes still dance with laughter. She’s never married, never had children. She links her arm through each of theirs and they walk like that, beneath the halo of summer trees, towards the grand entrance of the main building.

I wanted to say, last time we saw each other, none of us had a man in our lives. Fifty years on, and here we are again. No men, just us. And the children, and the grandkids- I always wanted to know why you never married again after Leon, Bee says.

One marriage was more than enough. You know, you make some mistakes, and because you’re doing the best you can and don’t have any good examples to live by, it’s all trial and error. And so the errors were made and I didn’t see the point in going through any of that kind of stuff again...

The dining hall fills slowly with men and women, talking softly, laughing. For some, there are tears. Heads are bent. Hair grey, or white, or non-existent.

Bee cannot swallow down the choking heartbreak. There was once a dream: that she would go to Africa and marry Phil, and that Meyer would join her eventually, and they would all live happily ever after. And the years have gone by and all that she imagined did come to pass, though so much unimaginable happened. And she has come full circle. She is back beneath the roof of the only place, which, despite its shadows, felt like home. And she cannot return. The passage of time haunts her (The Immigrant 235).

Just as a language contains a living memory of the origins of its words and syntax, so letters written in a language freeze the voice of the writer in time, and by immersion in that voice, a writer as reader, can, to some degree, resurrect that person. Reading the letters written to my grandmother immersed me in the ‘voices’ of the writers at a profound level. In the same way as a language-learner is acculturated into a new linguistic arena, a long-dead writer’s voice can be transmuted into another century by the act of an empathetic reading and writing.
Narrative Empathy

During the 1990s neuroscientists working with Macaque monkeys discovered a new group of premotor neurons, which fired not only when the monkey initiated an action, such as grasping something, but when it observed other monkeys or even humans engaging in the same action. This new group of neurons became known as mirror-neurons, and are the basis for the concept of empathy (Gallese, Eagle, and Migone 2007).

Empathy is defined as the ability to feel with, and understand the emotional state of, another living creature. But empathy is a broad term and different regions of the brain are responsible for different types of empathy. On the one hand, there is the simple empathy that relates to mirror responses to the actions of others. Functional Magnetic Resonance imaging (fMRI) reveals that when a person reads a sentence involving unique metaphors, for example ‘he had leathery skin,’ the sensory cortex lights up. When a reader reads about movement, for example ‘James kicked the ball,’ the motor cortex is engaged and, specifically, the leg area. So there is a one-to-one correlation between the actions of others, the fictional actions of others, and the areas in our own brains, which mirror those actions. This is the first level of empathy: we identify with our fellow humans and our brains reflect that by mirroring neurologically, the processes going on in others’ brains when they engage in certain actions (Mar and Oatley 2008).

But social neuroscience, using fMRI studies has distinguished between Theory of Mind (ToM) – which is the ability to understand the mental, emotional states of others as well as their intentions, aspirations and dispositions, relying on the prefrontal and temporal lobe areas of the brain (areas which mature relatively late in a human being’s development), and the ability to simply share the feelings and emotions of others which relies on the sensory-motor cortices and limbic and para-limbic structures in the brain. These areas mature earlier than the prefrontal cortex. The idea is then, that our ability to truly empathise with another’s mind state would develop later than our ability to empathise with simple emotions and sensations (Singer 2006).

So the empathy relating to ToM can be learned, and fiction, in particular, seems to have a remarkable and measurable impact on a reader’s ability to experience
emotional empathy over both the short and long-term (Coplan 2004). But before we can live into the mind-state of another, there is a neurological fine-tuning that happens which enables us to feel and sense what another is feeling and sensing.

What makes active attunement possible and what constitutes the biological basis for such attunement, we propose, is the existence of the mirror neuronal system and automatic embodied simulation. However, the mere existence of such a mirror system, while necessary for attunement, is not sufficient to guarantee it. For although the mirror system and embodied simulation may be hard-wired universal processes, we know that there is a wide range of individual differences in people’s capacity to understand and empathize with others (Gallese, Eagle, and Migone 2007, p. 153).

And reading words that elicit empathetic responses is one of the ways in which empathy in individuals increases.

One of the most enduring aspects of the relationship between authors and readers is that of empathy: we read because we desire empathy with the characters in a story, and I wrote with empathy in order to elicit empathy. Through cognition (understanding the words in front of us) and ensuing emotion, we think and we feel empathy. It goes without saying that a reader has to have, to a greater or lesser degree, a sympathetic, or better still, empathetic relationship with the protagonists in a story, or at least to their cause or motivation, in order to read beyond the first few pages. And that emotion, empathy, especially as it relates to reading, involves both a cognitive and an emotional response on the part of the reader, which, according to Susan Keen, cannot be separated from one another:

…in its strongest form, aesthetics' empathy describes a projective fusing with an object, which may be another person or an animal, but may also be a fictional character made of words, or even, in some accounts, inanimate things such as landscapes, art works, or geological features. The acts of imagination and projection involved in such empathy certainly deserve the label cognitive, but the sensations, however strange, deserve to be registered as feelings. Thus I do not quarantine narrative empathy in the zone of either affect or cognition: as a process, it involves both. When texts invite readers to feel, they also stimulate readers' thinking (Keen 2006, p. 213).

Keen also goes on to say that it is not clear that any specific narrative technique evokes strong empathetic responses. It seems to matter little whether the characters are flat or well rounded, whether the narrative is written in first person or third person, or whether the plot is gripping or meandering. Certainly a gripping plot involves the arousal areas of the brain more than a meandering one, but it is what each reader brings to a narrative that results in the reader’s experience of empathy.
In the creation of character, and in the immersion of self in that of the ‘other’, we have a unique opportunity as writers and readers afforded to us only in very particular circumstances: that of complete identification or immersion in another—albeit an aesthetically constructed one. In ordinary life, we are bound inside our own consciousness—the one position we can never escape regardless of how much we live into the lives and experiences of others. When we read we are emotionally transported into the point of view of a character, (and provided of course, that we identify with that character’s initial portrayal), we begin to live through another’s eyes and to experience the world from an ‘other’ point of view. This unique experience, which even in movies is not as profound (because we don’t bring to bear our own powers of imagination to create the physical and emotional attributes of screen heroes and heroines to the same degree), is what allows a kind of transmutation of self into the reality of another.

…Fiction presents a simulation of real-world problems, and therefore has real consequences for the reader. Often when someone reads a fictional story, identification with the characters in the story and emotional involvement in the story causes the reader to sympathize with the characters, and perhaps even experience the events in the story as if the reader experiences the events him/herself (Bal and Veltkamp 2013, p. 2).

Narrative empathy, then, refers to the psycho-emotional response, which mirrors the experience of a character. Neurologically-speaking, when we read a good story, even though we might be lying down on a bed or a couch, or sitting cramped in an economy seat on a flight from Brisbane to Singapore, areas of our brains are lighting up as they would do if we were running, eating, crying, making love or navigating our way through a complicated social interaction.

In an article entitled ‘Bookworms versus Nerds: Exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds’ the authors maintain that fiction readers have a greater Theory of Mind than readers of expository non-fiction (the authors haven’t mentioned creative or narrative non-fiction, but I will). The authors suggest, based on empirical studies, that readers of pro-social fiction are predisposed to behaving in a far more pro-social manner than their expository-non-fiction-reading counterparts:

…reading about complex social interactions such as those commonly described in narrative fiction, theoretically engages neural substrates similar to those used to navigate similar situations in the real-world (Mar et al. 2006, p. 696).
Writing *The Immigrant* became an exploration of the idea of the many different aspects of narrative empathy. In *The Immigrant*, the complex social interactions, the dialogue and character development, while based on real people and real situations, appear identical to the kinds of scenarios and characters one would find in a novel. The book is closer to literary fiction than it is to anything else. There is nothing expository or explicitly didactic in the text.

My aim in the construction of *The Immigrant* as a narrative text was to create a work that was as true to historical events as possible, but which read like a novel, so that when the real letters and diary entries appeared, the reader would be taken aback again and again by the fact that the book was in fact, non-fiction.

Example:

The void in Bertha’s life is an abyss. She looks into it and cannot see the bottom. It dissolves time and devours her childhood. She is adrift and fights to keep back tears.

May 25

…A mother’s love is the truest and what love I missed from my beloved mother. My brother Meyer and I shared that (*The Immigrant* 129).

In this sense, then, *The Immigrant* functions exactly as a work of fiction would, since the lines separating narrative non-fiction from fiction are necessarily blurred, and the similarities between the processes of writing fiction and narrative non-fiction have been well established in previous sections of this work.
If readers learn from fiction about complex social interactions and if the motivations, fears and dreams of characters inspire empathy and identification in the reader, then certainly the characters created in a work of non-fiction, whose lives are equally as rich and real as any fictional character’s life, would have an identical effect on the reader of narrative non-fiction or memoir.

When I was two-thirds of the way through writing *The Immigrant*, I understood that one of my own most profound experiences whilst reading letters from the last century, was an overwhelming sense of identification and empathy with the writers of the letters, with their life journeys, and as the facts about parallels between my own life and theirs emerged, a significant emotional transportation which led to a profound identification with the characters I was writing.

This emotional transportation on the part of the writer was the inspiration to convey the complexities of these characters’ lives, loves, journeys and struggles with enough authenticity so as to elicit the same degree of empathy on the part of the reader.

An empathetic reader is able to effect change in the world. The general idea is that in the medical arena, even doctors can’t offer comfort or understand the world of a patient and deliver effective care without the understanding of a patient’s narrative (Charon 1993). The reader then can be seen as healer; or at least exposure to narratives that evoke empathy also invoke the tendency to make right, to heal, to give comfort.

Further expanding on the idea of empathy and with reference again to medicine and healers, a study where second year medical students were asked to write down their own reflective narrative experiences of illness and share these narratives with one another, resulted in a far higher degree of empathy, something often seen lacking in medical personnel, where patients are identified by their bodies, and physicians, more often than not, by their minds and knowledge, creating a divide that was, in this study, overcome by the eliciting of empathy (DasGupta and Charon 2004).

Writer empathy, in this case, had to do with the immigrant experience, and with creating a deep sense of authenticity that requires a paring away of everything superfluous in order to create a reality, which ironically acts as a rival to the events that inspired it. Writing a biographical memoir and striving for authenticity in order to elicit empathy relies on several things.
A good memoir requires two elements—one of art, the other of craft. The first element is integrity of intention. Memoir is the best search mechanism that writers are given…If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own.

The other element is carpentry. Good memoirs are a careful act of construction. We like to think that an interesting life will simply fall into place on the page. It won’t (Suberman 2005, p. 6).

My innovation in The Immigrant was to use all the craft at my disposal to create the art representing the lives of my forebears, and inspire empathy for their struggles, their journeys and their lives, in order that readers might then reflect on their own lives, and feel comforted, inspired, hopeful. Writing The Immigrant was indeed, a ‘careful act of construction,’ and the process became the conscious creation of affect. Through the methodology and praxis and the understanding of some of the neuroscience of the effects of fiction on the brain and on behaviour, I set out to create a narrative that would employ the same devices found in fictional narratives. In the process, I experienced profound empathy as a writer for my deceased relatives, and for the characters that they became. The transference of this empathy to the reader might be experienced in the scene where Bertha loses her baby after three days, to jaundice. The scene was difficult to write, and emotionally affecting. The loss of this baby affected Bertha all her life. The theme of lost babies in the book repeats itself again later, when my first brother is born dead.

Nine months later Bee goes into labour. This birth is both an assault and a blessing. She wants to die, the pain is so unbearable but in the breaths between contractions she knows that there is nowhere else she’d rather be than having this baby.

In four hours, she gives birth to an angel. A little girl with pink fists and almond-shaped eyes. Her heart fills to bursting as she holds her tiny daughter in her arms.

- My darling, she says, and kisses the soft head.

Phil comes in that evening and brings Bobby to see his new sister. Bee holds her two children as close to her heart as she can, and Phil, not one easily given to emotion, lets tears run down his cheeks.

- I miss my mom, Bee says. I wish she were here.

As is the custom, the nurses come to take the baby away for the night. Phil and Bobby go home and Bee does all she can to prolong the time she can have with her daughter.

- You need your sleep, the nurse insists, and takes the baby off Bee’s breast. The baby screams and Bee begins to cry, but she doesn’t have any strength in her to ask for her child back.

In the morning, after very little sleep because her breasts are hurting like hell, she asks for her daughter immediately.
- I’m afraid we’ve had to put her in a special care unit, the nurse says.
- What?
- It’s not too bad. She’s got a bit of jaundice and we just need to monitor her.
- Jaundice? Is that bad?
- It’s very common Mrs. Davidow. She’ll be all right. Just have your breakfast now and you can come and see her in a little bit.

The child in the plastic bubble is yellow. Hours go by like centuries. Voices fade in and out. She thinks they keep telling her to eat. Her breasts leak milk down her gown and she doesn’t care. Her modesty is all gone. She watches the child go from yellow, to orange. She thinks the nurses help her out of the ward and back to her hospital bed. She imagines she is dying. No, it’s her mother dying. She can’t be sure if she’s dreaming. The night is a stormy sea of milk and blood.

In the morning, a nurse is sitting on the end of her bed. Her face is pale. Bee doesn’t register the words.

- I’m deeply sorry to inform you, Mrs. Davidow, that baby Davidow passed away in the night.

The scream that comes from her mouth is pulled from her, not made by her. Perhaps a doctor comes in. Perhaps someone administers an injection. Everything beyond her scream is dark and without time (The Immigrant 177).

**The Purpose: What is Innovative and Important about *The Immigrant***?

At a time when immigration is a controversial topic in Australia, and indeed all over the developed world, the lives of people who experience the transition from one culture to the next and from one generation to the next is one which deserves attention and understanding. Through imaginatively envisioned literature, the world becomes a more empathetic place. As stated previously in the section on empathy, when we absorb the narrative of another person through fiction or narrative non-fiction, we can do something unique that is impossible in everyday life: we can become someone else, experiencing their struggles and triumphs as our own. And brain research using functional MRIs has determined that reading fiction with strong emotional content in which the reader identifies with the protagonist elicits empathy and stimulates a compassionate response in the reader that is on a par with actually experiencing similar events with real people.

The purpose of my artefact is to encourage empathy and understanding for the immigrant experience, regardless of the cultural heritage of the immigrant. This purpose emerged as I wrote, because as I wrote, the story itself compelled me to feel such empathy for the journeys and lives of my forebears, that I saw in those journeys,
metaphors for the whole of human experience… and they seemed universal, and worthy of sharing.

The innovation and significance in this research is in the *affect*: letters written in the last century with profound emotional content, delineate richly-textured emotional experiences of my relatives who were immigrants in various countries a hundred years ago. Those letters interwoven with my own life narrative highlight a certain kind of experience, and record transgenerational trauma in a manner that hopefully enables readers to transfer the empathetic experience to a knowing, and out of this, to feel motivated, not to necessarily join an action group fighting for the rights of refugees and immigrants, but to become less binary, less susceptible to the way the media and the status quo insist on creating ‘others’ in every society; readers who will be able to detect and reject any ‘caste’ system in which a group of people are marginalised for their heritage, religious beliefs, or skin colour.

And further than this, thematically what is important in *The Immigrant* is the idea of the displacement of people born on their own continents. In Lithuania, my great-grandfather Jacob was in fear of his life because of his Jewish heritage, and made his escape from the bitter pre-holocaust Pogroms. I escaped South Africa fearing the rampant violence, which has made that country one of the most dangerous in the world. In Australia today, 100,000 years of continuous Indigenous culture is threatened with extinction, as a white, colonial power thrives after decimating the first people of Australia. On a daily basis, the vilification and demonisation of Indigenous Australians continues. ‘Boat people’, refugees risking their lives to get on leaky boats and cross the seas in search of safety, have become an idea of the ‘other’, a nightmare political tool, wielded with impunity to gain popularity or win electoral votes.

And so, the importance of what this book wishes to say is paramount to an evolving society: we have to realise that we are all somewhere in our families, Jews, boat people, native people, refugees, prisoners and colonisers. And anyone who is affected by a story that shows this may well feel less selfish, a little more tolerant and perhaps even, somewhat enlightened. So the affect is: that readers empathise with the immigrant experience; that they know it as a profoundly human experience (we are a migratory species, as a human race) and that they see people who run from Pogroms,
or Holocausts, or civil or international wars who share a profound grief and hope that will live on in future generations, as people they might meet and know and love.

The objective and the innovation in *The Immigrant* are the same: the dissolution of the ‘other’ through empathy.

*The Immigrant* attempts to recreate an emotional truth: while the characters and the details of their lives have historicity, I have filled in the silences.

The affect is also in the letters themselves. In a haunting imaginative sense, my forebears are imprisoned in the past. It was a moving and heartbreaking journey to watch their lives unfold as a reader will do in seeing their words. I knew, as I read these letters, who would die and how, and when, and who would live on.

In this way, a section of history becomes infused with individual lives, aspirations and emotional journeys that have to be re-imagined, creating a work of non-fiction that reads like fiction, but one which is full of ink-stains and the hand-written words of real people who lived real lives.

In this journey between history and story, I hope to have created the opportunity for empathy about the immigrant experience in the heart of the reader.

*The Immigrant* is an acknowledgement that the past is the present, and that the unknowable is infinitely imaginable, that what has happened is not cast in stone.
The Relevant Research Literature

Practice-led research means that most of the literature I deem relevant to the writing of The Immigrant was found en-route, or buried in long-forgotten recesses of memory only to emerge to consciousness as I began to assemble this exegesis.

During the writing of my creative artefact The Immigrant as well as this exegesis Writing the Immigrant, I read a lot of irrelevant things, and then I uncovered some gems. The relevant research literature ranges from the letters I read, to the bits of information relating to Ashkenazi Jews, to neuroscience, genetics and the nature of memory. There are however, three significant texts, which I would like to explore in depth because of the influence they have had on my writing of The Immigrant. The literature that I will refer to are two fictional texts, Fugitive Pieces by Anne Michaels (1996), The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005), as well as the non-fiction memoir, Soldier Blue by Paul Williams (2008).

I read Fugitive Pieces (Michaels 1996) more than a decade ago. I was touched by it, disturbed by it, and remember that when I was given the text as a gift and realised that the context was World War II, I almost put the book away for ever. I knew already then, that somehow for me, reading anything about the Holocaust or its survivors was almost too much to bear.

Fugitive Pieces charts the life of a young boy, Jakob Beer, who escapes the Nazis after his parents are killed and is found, covered in mud and rescued by a Greek geologist Athos Roussos who brings him up on Zakynthos in Greece, and eventually migrates with him to Canada after the war. Jakob gets married, becomes a poet and then dies tragically. The next part of the novel is told from the perspective of an admirer of Jakob’s poetry, a young man named Ben. The novel is of course, about layers of time, about memory and trauma and the legacies left behind. It is also about grief and the uncovering of literal and metaphorical truths. Critics accuse Anne Michaels of attempting to suggest that through art, meaning can be made of something as unspeakable as the Holocaust, that somehow aesthetics and poetry can even redeem the effects of the atrocities committed.

Despite being widely praised by critics, some have expressed reservations at the ethical implications of the novel’s aestheticization of the disturbing events that it describes (Grimwood 2003, p. 112).

Sue Vice states that the very poetic style of the novel:
seems to be a way of trying to wring aesthetic and meaningful comfort from an event which offers no redemption of any kind (Vice 2003, p. 9).

And yet if I look at the writing of The Immigrant, and some of the traumatic events it describes, and the way it uncovers the transgenerational trauma, or the way that this unfolded, even though Anne Michaels’ book is fiction, I wonder if the critics haven’t got everything the wrong way round. Perhaps trauma writes itself out into the world as poetry or art, and perhaps the author, the style of the author is an embodiment of traumatic events, a translation rather than a ‘wringing’ or an attempt to make something aesthetic out of something traumatic.

The book has almost disappeared in my conscious memory, and yet now that I look at it again in the light of having finished The Immigrant I recognise the themes, the aesthetics of the book, as familiar. When I read that story, my own story was still buried beneath my skin. One of the reasons I found it so difficult to read is that the book was touching on stories that lived in my own family. Jacob David Frank was a child of an earlier holocaust, long before Jakob Beer was invented. And Jacob’s legacy already lived in my own heart in some way.

In Fugitive Pieces, the metaphorical and physical geography of refugees, immigrants and those who have been emotionally and physically displaced plays a central role in the book. There is, it seems, a relentless search for belonging, for home:

Jakob adopts ‘surrogate’ places of partial belonging through spatial doublings and translations, all of which facilitate an imagined continuity between past and present places. In making the places of exile signify with the refugee's own loss, Michaels both extends Holocaust consciousness to places not usually associated with the event and affirms the survivor's need for continued place-based experience. Moreover, through immersion in the history of his exilic places, the survivor connects his own losses with those of others (Kandiyoti 2004, p. 303).

This critique seems to fit quite aptly with the exploration of exile in The Immigrant. Although I fled South Africa due to high crime and the fear of being the next statistic, and although living in the cold midwest of America was a kind of self-imposed exile, place-based experience and the ability to connect losses to losses that had gone before became a central emerging theme in The Immigrant.

Midwinter, the Midwest, USA. Wind chill sends the temperatures plummeting to seventy below zero. The windows of the small apartment ice over on the inside. I fight for each breath and I feel that I am living someone else’s life. I know these cracked streets and the smell of Kentucky Fried Chicken in the freezing air. And my African self rebels against the confines of an obliterating winter. I can’t breathe and I
stare out at the silent empty street where no one would dare walk. The trees are bare grey sticks against a white sky. The dirty snow has frozen solid on the sides of the road. Every living creature has fled this annihilating cold, except for us. I am an African transplant poorly equipped for the Midwest. I have no right of abode, no right to work, to go to the hospital if I can’t breathe. In this, the land of my grandmother’s birth, I am a foreigner, an invisible new arrival with a heart full of ideals that are rapidly crumbling. The weight that is on my chest has taken on a recognisable form, and I can see the shadow I wish to escape (The Immigrant 225).

In an in-depth analysis of post-holocaust identity in Fugitive Pieces (Michaels 2006), Catalina Botez writes:

Indubitably, forceful migration engenders a break with former patterns of selfhood and generates a re-shifting of identity elements such as the cultural, ethnical, national, psychological and geographical (Botez 2009, p. 266).

In investigating the idea of an emotional inheritance through creative writing and not research, I stumbled on themes and strands that have woven themselves not just through my own life and literature, but through the lives of fictional characters and their authors exploring similar territory.

The astounding and humbling experience of true practice-led research is that a cohesive whole book emerges, complete with themes and references to literature, a conversation with events and texts located firmly in the past that was not consciously intended, but that was uncovered. In this sense, the creative act seems to touch on things that speak for an alternate numinous reality. The inspirations, discoveries, parallels and realities between narratives are uncanny. It seems they can only be possible if, indeed, there is a shared web of human connectedness, an emergence of archetypes and threads that live in us, that connects me, a great-grandchild of Jacob Frank and his struggles for identity, for belonging and his legacy of children and grandchildren carrying quiet whispers in their blood, to the character Jakob Beer, a child of Anne Michael’s imagination, imbued with the same kind of legacy—as if that author and this author, regardless of lived experiences, can tap into the same imaginative, intensely human and irrefutable truth about love and loss and the meaning of place.

Anne Michaels writes in Fugitive Pieces:

Love makes you see a place differently, just as you hold differently an object that belongs to someone you love. If you know one landscape well, you will look at all other landscapes differently. And if you learn to love one place, sometimes you can also learn to love another. (Michaels 2010, p. 82)
When I first read *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2006), my initial reaction was a gut reaction, and must have come from some deep primitive well of unacknowledged blood history…and I have not come across any literature touching on this possibility so perhaps it is worth bringing up here: the question that might arise in the heart of a Jewish reader, is how Zusak, a German, can write a book that uses Jewish characters to elicit pity and horror for the prime purpose of evoking love and compassion for the German characters in his book who represent the relatively few Germans during WWII who went against the status quo?

Initially, the Jewish reader might be forgiven for wondering whether that book was an act of merely assuaging transgenerational guilt. (Zusak’s parents lived through the war and the single traumatic image that seemed to have evoked this guilt was one in which an old man was kicked and beaten by guards for trying to give bread to a mass of starving Jews heading to an extermination camp).

Though this may not be a popular or shared perception, I considered whether an author of German descent could indeed legitimately describe events that he had never suffered or even remotely encountered. The correlation between Nazi Germany and the treatment of the Jews, and White Australia and its treatment of the Aboriginal people is undeniable. And in Australia, no white writer would even be allowed to presume to understand or express the suffering of this land’s Indigenous people, or appropriate their experience or point of view. It came up as a huge question: could *The Book Thief* be an appropriation of Jewish suffering and history? The Jews and their suffering in the book seem to be there mostly as foils. They exist to paint the background sets the appropriate colours, (Zusak 2006) and the hidden Jew, Max is a foil for Liesel’s growth and development.

As mentioned before, in other contexts worldwide it is generally considered a no-go area for a writer representing a current or former oppressor to explain the suffering of the oppressed. In Australia white writers are strongly discouraged by the publishing world and the indigenous community to even try to imagine the total living conditions and experiences of indigenous people whose 100,000-year-old culture has been all but decimated during the short 200 years of white occupation. *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2006), it could be argued, seems at least thematically, to be in danger of riding the wave of other people’s real grief about real events for expedient literary purposes. A reader might ask whether any white Australian descendent of a nation of white people responsible for the massacres of Aboriginal children in waves of genocide
which matched the Holocaust element by element (Moses 2004), could write a book in which s/he demonstrated how during that time of stolen children and mass killings, there were indeed, kind-hearted white Australians who took in Aboriginal children and loved them and were appalled by the horrors they saw.

So it was a question for me, about legitimacy: can a German writer write about Jewish suffering? Can a white writer write about black suffering? Can a straight person write about a gay person’s challenges and struggles? Can men write about women, or express adequately, their suffering?

On the one hand, such an act could be seen as expedient appropriation. With my eye on the subtle point of an author’s right to tell a story, and with my own position as the descendent of Jews who were traumatised, vilified and who became refugees, I have to also acknowledge that, even though not in my own direct heritage, Jews have been the oppressors in Palestine for decades. When I lived and taught at a university in Qatar, my Palestinian student who had been shot at the age of 13 by an Israeli soldier as the boy went to get medicine for his sick mother, showed me the scar on his stomach where the bullet had lodged itself and said to me, ‘if I see a Jew, I will kill him.’ And as my eyes filled with tears of compassion and heartbreak for the boy he was, I realised that I was that Jew, and that if he knew, he would kill me.

And so, in my argument about the right of the author to tell a story, I must concede that the human imagination, when coupled with deep empathy, must of necessity be autonomous, unconstrained by race, class, gender. Doesn’t the world become a more compassionate place when we are allowed, as readers and writers, to dissolve the very idea of an ‘other’, to live into the realm of the ‘other’; to inhabit that world and imagine that reality to such a degree that it become our own? And so I looked at *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2006) as a valid literary journey into the heart of the holocaust; narrator Death, and the young German heroine, Liesel, together offer a profound contribution to tolerance, to world peace and to literature.

I too, as a writer would like to be free of constraints, would like my characters, both in fiction and non-fiction, to emerge from the writing self which transcends always and forever, race, class, gender, background, religious or personal beliefs or affiliations. A true writing self is an omniscient and benevolent creator spurred on by the desire to create empathy, understanding, identification and immersion. Without that, our work will be tossed aside after page one and no characters will leap off the pages and into our hearts. *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2006) liberated me from my
prejudices, and in retrospect, allowed me the freedom to write any character, to inhabit any world and reveal its pain and its joys.

The other aspect in *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2006) that influenced perhaps more directly how I wrote *The Immigrant* was the use of explicit foreshadowing and plot-spoiling. In the most poignant of scenes, Death, who is telling the story, lets us know that the boy who loves Liesel, Rudy Steiner, will die before his time:

‘How about a kiss, *Saumensch*?’

He stood waist-deep in the water for a few moments longer before climbing out and handing her the book. His pants clung to him, and he did not stop walking. In truth, I think he was afraid. Rudy Steiner was scared of the book thief's kiss. He must have longed for it so much. He must have loved her so incredibly hard. So hard that he would never ask for her lips again and would go to his grave without them (Zusak 2006, p. 303).

Something powerful happens with those kinds of plot-spoilers. They weigh the heart of the reader who knows the fate of the characters. They make the present moment far more poignant because they highlight the reality of moments: everything passes. This too, will pass. And so each moment in the book, once one knows about the future, is imbued with a special kind of poignancy. The only way that Zusak can create this deeply moving omniscience is through his narrator’s position as Death.

In *The Immigrant* the narrator (the Shelley Davidow in the story), is present in the present tense of 1916, or 1938, for example, but the narrator, like Zusak’s Death, knows everything that will happen; the heartbreaking reality of knowing how long each character will live, even as they write out words full of hope and youth and imagination, of knowing their lives, their struggles, and the deaths they will die, put me, or rather the narrator of *The Immigrant*, in the same position as Death. And in this position, in order to evoke the adequate emotional response in the reader, it seems unavoidable that the reader must be placed in the same position of knowing the future. Plot-spoiling, then, is an integral part of *The Immigrant*.

Jacob feels an embryonic joy that will never have the chance to illuminate his life. An impending tragedy is already there in the rough palms of his hands, in the fullness of his trembling lips as he remembers jumping off the train in Vilnius, feeling the cold wrap icy tentacles around his heart (*The Immigrant* 12).

In this extract Jacob’s life, but also the lives of his descendents, are already earmarked as having a certain quality. Any scenes of joy that come after this paragraph are haunted by the sense of impending tragedy. The narrator of this story already
knows all the outcomes, and the readers, too, are then invited into the position of omniscience. At then end then, when things do transpire as predicted, the effect is cathartic and heart-breaking, and speaks to us of the very thing which we cannot do in our day-to-day lives, perhaps thankfully: know the future of our lives and the lives of those we love.

Perhaps the book that affected my use of foreshadowing or, more explicitly plot-spoiling the most was the memoir Soldier Blue by Paul Williams (2008).

The memoir is a complex temporal narrative in which the personal and the political evolve side-by-side and in which the future of the country is juxtaposed against the narrative’s present. The book is a moving eye-witness account of the futility of war...of a young man’s coming-of-age against the backdrop of the rise and fall of an entire civilisation.

His story began innocently enough, but even in the beginning he sensed foreboding, futility, ineptitude. His parents had gone out to Africa taking him with them on their adventure. They went to make something of themselves but the seeds of his destiny were already sown in their smallest gestures, hesitations, and doubts. (Williams 2008, p. 4)

As writers, we do not necessarily seek to imitate or copy from other writers, but throughout history and time, the act of ‘learning from the master’ and being an apprentice plays itself out in a variety of roles. No one wants to be a thief, a plagiarist. And yet, as writers we are all thieves. And so I acknowledge the deep and at the time inadvertant influence of the use of plot-spoiling and foreshadowing in Soldier Blue on the use of temporal dislocation in The Immigrant. Williams’ use, especially, of political foreshadowing as Africa went from a colonial to post-colonial era, was without a doubt an inspiration for how I evolved the temporal aspects of my memoir so that the past, present and future emerged as single panorma of images in certain sections of The Immigrant.

And yet I had already developed a distinctive style of episodic writing that allowed me to make the temporal leaps with ease. In my memoir The Eye of the Moon (Davidow 2007), the reader is forced to jump around in time and space as her life is lived out in the book’s present, while events of the past keep rising out of the milk the narrator froths for making cappucinos at a beachside café in California.

The present days are spent frothing milk. It is in the froth that everything has a chance to emerge. It is in California, that this happens. There is no natural grandeur; no sense of majesty about the setting. Movie-stars cross paths with homeless people. This place is an endless crossing of paths. The surface shimmers with bright lights
and brilliant images, but below these, there is a hollowness, and once in a while, the earth shudders and threatens to collapse in on itself…

There is the nightmare of memory. The night in the Gold Toyota. How there are now two women in the world, of different generations, both for whom you will never exist as your true self. Whom you can never meet because parallel lines never converge, even after infinity (Davidow 2007, p. 73).

*The Immigrant* was influenced no doubt, by both these memoirs. In particular, though, the book owes a debt of gratitude to Paul Williams for the political foreshadowing technique used in *The Immigrant*. In the following extract from *The Immigrant*, the future of the country Mozambique is described against the reality of the beautiful countryside Phil and Bertha Davidow travel through to their honeymoon destination in Lourenzo Marques, which in 1938 is still a quaint colony ruled by the Portuguese.

Time will move the country relentlessly forwards. Eventually, the millions of Mozambicans, tired after five hundred years of colonial rule, will rebel against the Portuguese and in 1975, win it back.

Then a civil war will rage across the land, lasting for twenty years, littering the earth with landmines that will kill thousands of children and leave more thousands without limbs. In the next century, eighty percent of the population will live in extreme poverty. It will no longer be South Africa’s number one honeymoon destination.

When Bertha looks out of the train window, they are travelling through orchards outside Lourenzo Marques. She has never seen oranges grow and she cannot believe her eyes. As far as the eye can see, golden citrus globes hang like miniature suns in the dense green (*The Immigrant* 141).

In *Soldier Blue*, in the middle of the war, the narrator skips forwards in time in three leaps, mapping the disolution of three distinctive realities and ending in a post-post-colonial Zimbabwe in which all dreams of independence and euphoria will have dissolved into the harsh sunlight.

The irony, of course, is that three years from now, I would not have had to fight at all. From 1972 until 1978, war was the status quo, and my military service a normal rite of passage. But unknown to me, as early as 1977 the regime was beginning to crumble; by 1978, Smith had been strong-armed into settlement; in 1979, he set in place a moderate (‘puppet’) black government, which collapsed within six months; and by 1980, the war, the regime, the thousand-year reign was all over. My classmates in intake 155, 156, 157 would take the brunt of the war in casualties, but by 1979, conscription would end and the ‘terror war’ would be over.

Three years from now, the wet street my parents were now crossing to get back to their cars would no longer be called Railway Avenue, but Kenneth Kaunda Avenue, after the Zambian president who assisted our enemy zipra in the war. Those three
hundred families sending their boys to fight against zanla’s Robert Mugabe, public 
enemy number one, and now driving back to their white, middle-class suburbs in 
Hillside, Greendale and Eastlea, would soon have to drive across Robert Mugabe 
Way and onto Samora Machel Avenue to get home.

And if we were to squint myopically even further into the future, say twenty five 
years from now, we would see those same parents smiling with cynical satisfaction at 
the confirmation of their worst fears and direst predictions about African majority 
rule. See how these neat roads have degenerated into potholes – this is the Africa up 
north Smith was warning us about. We were right! Smith was right! The same trains 
would leave from the same station, but the sidewalks would be lined with war-
maimed beggars. Large black families would wait patiently in long queues with 
plastic bags, goats and chickens, for delayed, overloaded trains; the lavatories would 
overflow with sewerage; litter would plaster the fence in a solid wall. In twenty 
years’ time the signs Robert Mugabe Way, Kenneth Kaunda Avenue, and Samora 
Machel Avenue would be gone, stolen for use as coffin handles for the many aids 
victims, and eventually the train itself (yes, the same Garrett articulated loco) would 
stop running because amateur pan-handlers would undermine the tracks on the way to 
Bulawayo in a vain search for gold. And Mugabe, in his drive for total control, would 
implement draconian measures of repression: detention without trial, torture, 
disenfranchisement. In order for his Socialist state to succeed, he would find it 
necessary to intensify racial hatred and engulf the whole sub-continent in a major 
conflict, take away civil liberties, gag the press and expel all foreign dignitaries who 
disagreed with him.

But not now. Not yet. In 1977, the war was still smouldering, and I had to 
live through this slow-burning chunk of history (Williams 2008, p. 133).
Concluding Thoughts

Practice-led research lead me into the dark recesses of the unconscious, out of which all dreams, images, stories and myths emerge. I discovered there the irrefutable reality about texts that we read and whose images live on in that subterranean realm of deep memory: all writing, all creation owes its existence to other writers and creators. The relevant research literature, in terms of creative narratives, emerged only by tapping into the hidden parts of the writer’s psyche that collect, over decades, themes, styles, techniques which then re-emerge, reborn, in someone else’s work.

When I began to explore the subtle idea of a ‘whispering in the blood’, a special code, a soul disposition passed down through generations. My research took me into the halls of history and especially, the history of the Ashkenazi Jews. Their origins are heatedly debated both amongst scientists, geneticists and historians. It is linguistically and culturally obvious, though, that the Ashkenazi Jews have a heritage that can both be traced back to the Rhineland Jews of the 12th century and to the Middle East (Elhaik 2013). Every member of the worldwide current Ashkenazi Jewish population are as closely related as fourth or fifth cousins (Ostrer 2012).

Despite the debate as to whether the original Ashkenazi Jews can be traced back to the Rhineland or to an area around modern-day Israel, the fact of the matter remains: for hundreds of years, Jews in Europe spoke Yiddish, derived from High German. The word ‘Yiddish’ itself means ‘Jewish’. In German, ‘Judisch’. In writing The Immigrant, I discovered that Jacob Frank and his wife Ethel spoke Yiddish, and as I looked at my own life, what emerged in this research was that there was indeed a traceable thread: I learned German without an accent as a teenager. My parents spoke no other languages at home, and even though I learned both Afrikaans and Zulu at school, at no time was I ever regarded as ‘not having an accent’ or speaking fluently. I spoke those languages like most of my white, English-speaking contemporaries: with a white, English South African accent. But German rolled off my tongue as though it had been buried in the depths of my being and was waiting to emerge. I felt like a foreigner returning home to an old mother-tongue.

I lost myself in researching the origins of the Ashkenazi, for the simple interesting fact that I had not realised before, that this particular group of Jews is genetically
distinguishable from other Jewish populations and contemporary European and Middle Eastern populations, since they have 47 per cent more novel variants per genome, resulting at least 19 devastating genetic disorders including Tay Sachs Syndrome (Myerowitz and Costigan 1988), and heart disease, and on the flip-side of that, having inherited as a payoff, disproportionately high IQ’s, ‘more than one standard deviation higher than the north western European average…’ (Cochran, Hardy, and Harpending 2006, p. 659), due to ‘an increase in the frequency of particular genes that elevated IQ as a by-product of (a) selective regime which led to an increased incidence of hereditary disorders.’ (Cochran, Hardy, and Harpending 2006, p. 659) In the arts, economics and the sciences, Ashkenazi Jews are over-represented.

As I stumbled upon this research a month or two after having written *The Immigrant*, I began to wonder at the various ‘whisperings in the blood’, the early deaths on Phil’s side of the family, the heart disease on both sides of the family, the musical themes and threads that seemed in some way to tie generations together. Perhaps, I began to think, there might be more than a metaphorical aspect to these whispers. But the only way to connect the threads that tie the generations in *The Immigrant* together, is indeed through metaphor and allusion. This, I know as a writer, is the only truth.

In terms of language acquisition and the theme of German running through the book, it will never be empirically verifiable that my affinity for German came from a deep whispering lodged in my brain, where that language, those cadences and structures, linked me back to my European ancestors who spoke German and Yiddish through the centuries. But at a metaphorical or soul-level, the connection is undeniable: I can live in the language as easily almost as I live in English. German is full of richness. Despite Granny Bee’s overt opposition to me going to Germany to learn the language, despite what should have been a foray into old enemy territory, my soul knew more than my intellect that I was connected to these people, that German Ashkenazi Jews were everywhere in Germany before Hitler exterminated them.

In a side foray into the idea that Ashkenazi Jews are as closely related as fourth or fifth cousins, I discovered a composer, a man whose crime was that he was Jewish. He lived through two world wars and died probably in a concentration camp. His
name was Alexei Davidow. I don’t know how closely we are related, but given his heritage, his name, and the fact that Davidow is not an exceptionally common surname, I imagine that we are not too distantly connected. He spoke English and German. He was held in the Buchenwald for some time in 1938, and died in 1940. I had felt so ill when I first visited the Buchenwald, as if I knew something in my blood.

Alexei Davidow (4 September 1867 — 7 March 1940) Composer

Prisoner Number:
74050
Folder Number:
AA0446 [0446]
Page Number:
40
Line Number:
662
Between 27 Jul 1938 - 30 Dec 1938
Sex: Male
Language:
- English
- German
Persecution Status:
- ‘Asocial’ targets
- Jehovah's Witness
- Jew
- Romani
Prisoner Number: 1 - 121625
Number of Persons (Exact): 22127
Place of Incarceration: Sachsenhausen [concentration camp], Germany
Place Transferred:
- Auschwitz [concentration camp], Poland
- Buchenwald [concentration camp], Germany
- Dachau [concentration camp], Germany
- Flossenbürg [concentration camp], Germany
- Königsberg
- Lublin
- Mauthausen [concentration camp], Austria

(Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database)

I had finished writing *The Immigrant* when I discovered Alexei Davidow. I began to uncover more about him. He had been a composer, but also a prolific writer, a music critic. And he had written in German, which I could, of course, read. I found a digital version of a massive work termed ‘Die Musik,’ or ‘The Music’, a collection of
critiques of musical performances in Germany published in 1905. I read through sixty pages of German to find the section that he had written, and it was a revelation: he is writing during WW1. He does not know what will before him when yet another war tears through Europe. He discusses a visit to the opera, where a certain Lord Zolotarsky has made prices reasonable twice a week, so that the youth and the wealthy public can both come to be nurtured and sustained by the aesthetic enjoyment of great music, and he ends by saying:

\[ \text{Als Schluss haben wir noch hinzuzufügen, dass der Besuch ein guter war und dass trotz der Unruhen des Krieges, des sozialen Kampfes, das Interesse für Kunst und Musik wach blieb.} \]

Finally we can only say that the visit was a good one, and that despite the turmoil of war and social upheaval, the interest for art and music remains awake (The Internet Archive).

At the end of *The Immigrant*, which in some sense has followed the musical trajectory of a fugue, I use a musical reference as a final word. The `Coda` is a concluding section to a piece of music, but it is usually formally distinct and from the rest of the work. The last paragraph is that coda, and though it was written before I discovered Alexei, his sentiments emerge in my own heart:

Time shatters into segments and surrounds me with images and words, and then I hear a fugue, played by a young boy in the music room next door. His hands liberate the story: not a single voice, but many, connected by a motif, a whispering that repeats itself, returning to its main subject, over time, through generations, re-emerging, a contrapuntal development of journeys across oceans, of grief and loss and love and hope (*The Immigrant* 247).
Afterword

In discovering Alexei Davidow and his writing about music in my research-led practice, it was as though I had stumbled on an even deeper ‘whispering’, and that was: I am connected to my forebears by shimmering threads of soul dispositions, and music and love and heartbreak and genetic weaknesses; I am also connected to a wider more extended family, and beyond that, as human beings, we are all connected to one another through empathy, through understanding that we are not ‘selves’ and ‘others’ distinguished by ever-smaller circles of elements that identify us into separate clusters, but one worldwide group of human beings, who understand deeply, grief and loss and love, and hope. Through the exploration of the transference of memories and motifs over generations, the nature of immersion and the powerful affect of narrative empathy, I hope to have created an innovative biographical memoir. And if my words ever make it out beyond the confines of my own imagination, and I am able to contribute even in the smallest way to the world becoming a more tolerant and empathetic place for immigrants everywhere, I will have done something valuable.
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