

Faction, Fact and Fiction*

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In Pacific Islands literary studies, the term ‘faction’ was popularised by the historian Brij V. Lal’ book, *Mr Tulsi’s Store*. Published in 2001 and reissued as a free download in 2013 by the ANU E Press, it ‘is by far the most widely read’ of Lal’s books, of which there are many (Lal 2001, 2011: 5; 2013). As he explains:

To make some sense of my lived reality, I began to write what I have termed ‘faction,’ where I try to capture the actual lived experience in fictional or quasifictional terms. I write about things I have observed or experienced, about stories I have been told: a family quarrel, the politics of running local schools, religious and cultural tensions – and I write about them creatively but with disciplined imagination. Unlike a novelist, I cannot conjure something out of thin air. I work with material given to me by direct experience or observation, and from that I create a connected narrative. Perhaps this is what novelists do as well, I do not know. My concern is to capture the inner truth rather than the factual accuracy of an experience (Lal 2011: 119).

Lal thought he was on to something new and that he had coined the word ‘faction’ (fact + fiction = faction), but he was mistaken. He had no idea that ‘faction’ was an established literary style and was very surprised to learn that many writers during the 1930s, for example, were writing in an ‘ambiguous, first-person descriptive vein, a then fashionable genre which blurred any clear line between fiction and autobiography – truthful to experience but not necessarily to fact’ (Crick 1980: 96n). In other words, faction. And I was very surprised to recently learn that there is a seemingly identical genre that goes by the name *roman à clef* (literally,

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novel with a key), the invention of which was attributed to Madeleine de Scudery (1607-1701), ‘who created it to disguise from the general reader the public figures whose political actions and ideas formed the basis of her fictional narratives’ (Boyde 1999: 155). In that sense, faction has been around for a long time.

The word ‘faction’ itself is of much more recent origin. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term back to as recently as 1967. It took a while for the word to find a niche in the major literary reference works (e.g. Drabble 1995: 341) and even now it is hardly a household word. And neither is it ‘a particularly helpful term. Most novels, if one were so inclined, could be described as factions: only works of fantasy would seem to be excluded’ (Riemer 1996: 65).

A matter needs to be clarified because Lal complicated matters when he initially spoke about faction. In a rare moment of ambiguity he wrote:

In recording my experiences, I have privileged truth over accuracy, attempting to catch the thoughts and emotions rather than dry facts about village life. For obvious reason, some names have had to be changed and some conversations imagined. I have tried to recall the past creatively, imaginatively, rendering factual, lived experience through the prism of semi-fiction. I call this kind of exercise ‘faction’ writing. It is the most satisfactory way I know of remembering a past unrecorded by written events (Lal, 2001: x).

It is the phrase ‘to recall the past creatively, imaginatively, rendering factual, lived experience through the prism of semi-fiction’ that confuses in the context of *Mr Tulsi’s Store*. What happened was that Lal was conflating faction and autobiography and lumping the two under the rubric creative writing. His autobiographical writings were based largely on memory whereas academic writing involves being tied to the eternal footnote. Rather, most of *Mr Tulsi’s Store* is autobiography, where Lal attempts to get as close to the truth as he can manage. The extent of confusion may be gauged from Jeremy Popkin’s unsurpassed work on historians’ autobiographies where he describes the *entire* book as Lal ‘inventing a new category of narrative’ (Popkin 2005: 67). The same conflation between faction and other more factual forms of writing persisted in *Bittersweet*, a collection of essays edited by Lal (2004) mostly containing factual chapters about people’s reflections on their personal experiences. Lal’s use of the term faction is a remarkable example of someone replicating an existing genre, down to the very name, without realising its existence.

Actually, only two of *Mr Tulsi's Store's* twelve chapters are outright faction – namely, the chapter entitled ‘Mr Tulsi's Store’, where an avaricious money lender gets his come-uppance, and ‘Kismet’, where a newly-appointed secondary school teacher falls for one of his students (Lal 2001:45–57, 185–205). In these chapters, degrees of licence are exercised: names are changed, conversations are invented or reconstructed, events and episodes extraneous to what actually happened may be pressed into service. But the inner kernel of such recounting is written as he himself observed or was told. Whatever the extent of literary licence, they are about, or based upon, real people, actual events and lived experience. The autobiographical chapters, by contrast, are as accurate to fact as he can make them.

Lal was initially motivated to write faction, first, because he yearned to write in a creative vein and, second, because he could do so with regard to his own background in being raised in the sugar belt outside Labasa. His training as an historian had made him realise that a pivotal period of Fijian rural life, from the 1930s through to the 1960s, was largely undocumented in the archives and needed chronicling before it receded from view. He told me:

It is an enormously important period in Indo-Fijian history. Indenture had ended, new cultural and social institutions were being set up, schools and newspapers were being established. This was a time when education was becoming important... How did this community so near to the shadows of indenture create that type of world – village life, the ways in which they celebrated life, and mourned its passing, the ways in which they created voluntary associations of self help, the way they saw themselves as a people and their place in the larger scheme of things? I was part of that world of post-war village life: prehistoric, no running water, electricity or tar sealed roads, no telephones. I was part of that world for which there was no documentation. It was a very important part of our life and of Fijian history overall. But how do you write about that past when you don't have records and people's memories are fading and many of them are dead? (quoted in Munro 2009: 286).

Writing about village life during his childhood presented unexpected difficulties because he only had his early memories upon which to draw, and yet he had to be truthful to lived experience. At the same time

he had to move beyond his familiar academic parameters. He was trying to write about the experience of a generation from memory – to capture the spirit of the age. Although he had to write *as* an historian, he could not write *like* an historian. His children's reactions impressed upon him the urgency of recreating on paper the lost world of his own childhood: they simply could not comprehend a universe so alien to them. In short, Lal aspired in his faction *and* his autobiographical writing to ‘connect today's disconnected and dispersed generation of Indo-Fijians with their historical and cultural roots’ (Lal 2003: 46).

So what is the place of faction? When is faction to be preferred over strictly factual writing?

Clearly, as Lal maintains, faction is one way forward when the archival sources are silent or near-silent about a subaltern past. At this point, memory and reminiscence, perforce, come into play. There is also the motivation that an author may wish to protect the identities of those they write about, which is so in Lal's case.

Others are not so considerate, and it is little wonder that so many novels contain the disclaimer that their contents bear no resemblance to any person, living or dead. As the biographer Carl Rollyson points out:

Many novelists think nothing of putting their loved ones (not to mention their hated ones) into their fiction. And fiction can be brutal and, to say the least, unfair. No biographer, for legal reasons alone, could be half as critical or vicious. I find it extraordinary that reviewers should think biographies, even ‘attack’ biographies, come anywhere near the level of sheer gratuitous nastiness that novelists are capable of committing to writing (Rollyson 2003: 3).

Take the English novelist W. Somerset Maugham (1974–1965) who travelled the ‘colonial circuit’, accepting hospitality and writing thinly-disguised and malicious stories about his hosts. He went a step further in his novel *Cakes and Ale* (1884–1941), which parodies fellow-novelist Hugh Walpole (under the fictional name of Alroy Kear with brutal accuracy as a writer who established his reputation by flattering critics into writing laudatory reviews of his books. It was calculated to take Walpole down a peg or two, and it certainly did. Maugham denied that Walpole was his target and even inserted the disclaimer in subsequent editions that Alroy Kear was not based on Walpole (Wrigley 2006: 330). Long after Walpole's death, an unrepentant Maugham admitted his subterfuge, adding by way of explanation that ‘Hugh was a ridiculous creature’

(Maugham 1975: 166), thus confirming his reputation as 'a fairly poisonous old toad' (Hamilton 1992: 292).

But by no means do all writers of fiction or faction write in a spirit of vindictiveness. The Yorkshire veterinary surgeon James Herriot (of *All Creatures Great and Small* fame) disguised the identities of his characters in order to protect the innocent. Herriot (whose real name was Alf Wight) never lost 'the never losing the instinct to keep secret the true fact behind his stories' (Wight 2000: 257). Thus, he altered story lines, as well as disguised locations and identities. He sometimes made himself the central character when the story related to someone else.

But his faction stories have other dimensions. Herriot (1916–95) was a romantic conservative who looked nostalgically back on a bygone era whose wholesomeness stood in stark contrast to the permissiveness of the 'horrible sixties'. There is a strong morality to his stories, which celebrate the older, more solid, virtues of his upbringing, which he felt were all around him in rural Yorkshire but so lacking in contemporary urban Britain. Despite the (implicit) late-1930s through-to-the 1950s setting of the stories, many were of later origin (Wight, 2000: 257) – which creates the irony the Herriot was celebrating older values of hard work and integrity on the basis of occurrences in later decadent decades. Unravelling fact from fiction is fraught but, like Lal, Herriot was interested in truth of another kind – in providing a valid depiction of life as it was in the Yorkshire Dales. It seems that this depiction had a wider application. Herriot's son explains that a farmer in Staffordshire mentioned to him: 'We've all been there! All us farmers are the same, no matter what part of the country we are from. All the stuff your Dad writes about is so true; we've seen it all!' (quoted in Munro 2003: 75).

By contrast there is no nostalgia in Lal's stories of village life. These texts get beneath the surface appearances to the internal dynamics—the egos, the stresses and strains of relationships, patterns of conflict and power, defining the rules of the game. The irony here is that Lal sets out to recapture a world he is glad to have escaped. That world is portrayed as containing little joy and much sadness as people cope with the hardships of daily life, the pervasive turmoil of personal relationships and the frequent enough injustices of social interactions.

It is not difficult to agree in principle with the historian Max Beloff, that:

Sometimes I think the novelist may be a better guide to what we need to know and understand. Trollop's political novels are worth innumerable academic theses about nineteenth-

century politics; Paul Scott's *Raj Quintet* is more illuminating than anything else that has been written about the 'transfer of power' in India. Historians do a mundane job and are perhaps rightly less well regarded and less well rewarded (Beloff 1992: 24).

Interestingly, historian Robin Moore worked on the novelist's papers to provide an understanding of how Scott developed his view of India and the Raj, as expressed in the four-volume *Raj Quartet* and transformed his memories and experiences into fiction (Moore 1990). In much the same way, an overview of campus novels, whatever their individual mix of fact and fiction, provide an accurate enough gauge of the issues besetting the academy as well as charting the changes in universities (Showwater 2005).

But where does the usefulness of fiction and semi-fiction begin and end. A potential hazard of faction, as I see it, stems from its typically composite nature that people, places and events are drawn in from quarters. It can result in faction resembling sit-com, such as *Coronation Street*, in that the characters live in a state of perpetual hypertension that bears little resemblance to ordinary, everyday life. This is what Pamela Rushby (in this volume) identifies as the need to make the story and the background realistic. There ought not to be a credibility gap where a knowledgeable reader is saying that the scenario is impossible.

But it is for another reason that faction, for an historian of my ilk, presents difficulties as a usable record of the past. Given the typically indeterminate line between fact and fiction, it is of limited usefulness in providing reliable concrete facts, however accurate the overall picture. But one learns to use the evidence that is available. For peoples whose daily lives go largely unrecorded, the use of faction can be illuminating, although it must count as oblique evidence. In this way, as historian Hugh Trevor-Roper pointed out, Sir Walter Scott's interest in collecting Scottish ballads was not a antiquarian indulgence, for ballad literature, to the student of it, is inseparable from history: it is the direct expression of a historical form of society which often has no other documents. In collecting the ballads of the past, Scott was re-creating and illustrating a vanished or a vanishing society, and thereby, indirectly, becoming its historian (quoted in Worden 2015: 12).

There are other times, however, when a semi-fictional approach is exactly what not to do, especially when it is important to brush away the myths and legends that have enveloped an individual. A case in point concerns James McNeish's factional biography of Jack Lovelock, the

New Zealand middle-distance runner who won the gold medal for the 1500-metre event at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936 in world record time (McNeish, 2009). Despite doing a considerable amount of interviewing and archival research, McNeish adds to the mystification by inventing episodes, such as sessions with a psychiatrist. Far from presenting the essential truth, as McNeish claimed, he introduced another set of distortions, and ones that are likely to stick in the public mind. Such objections were raised by David Colquhoun, himself a scholar of Lovelock, who made the obvious point that Lovelock's life is 'fascinating enough without the fiction' (Colquhoun, 2008a, 2008b, 2009).

At least McNeish acknowledged that he was writing semi-fiction but others sometimes resort to calculated deception in the interest of sales. Thus Somerset Maugham's nephew Robin wrote a book called *Conversations with Willie*, claiming that it was based on notes he took at the time – when in fact, parts of the book are based on Maugham's letters to his nephew (Maugham 1978; Morgan 1980: xviii). One wonders why he resorted to such a subterfuge, just as I wonder why the naturalist Gerald Durrell's (1925–95) *My Family and Other Animals* (1956) so needlessly strays from factuality. The enchanting tale of an Anglo-Indian family's six-year sojourn on the Greek island of Corfu in the mid- to late-1930s is a much-loved book of my childhood and a deserved best-seller. As Durrell's biographer points out, *My Family and Other Animals* 'remains very close to the spirit, and often the letter, of his experiences on the island as a boy, and his recollection of places, landscapes and the natural history of Corfu are surprisingly exact'. But he warns that the book 'has a number of shortcomings as biographical source material – a tenuous chronology, an anecdotal approach, and some tinkering with the literal truth' (Botting 1999: 611). There was actually considerable tinkering with the literal truth, and although Durrell did say that he had 'been forced to telegraph, prune and graft, so that there I little left of the original continuity of events' (quoted in Botting 1999: 230), the book is presented as factual, to be taken at face value. One wonders why such distortions occur, just as Jefferson Decker (in this issue of *Fijian Studies*) takes issue with the subterfuges surrounding the autobiography of Wyatt Earp's wife, Josephine Marcus.

One might say, what does it matter? As a practicing historian, I'll end on a polemical note and say that it does matter. It matters a lot. Whereas those from a literary criticism background are apt to doubt or even deny the existence of 'truth', the distinction is often a simple one. Historian Eric Hobsbawm 'strongly defends the view that what historians investi-

gate is real'; he attacked those who 'deny that objective reality is accessible' (Hobsbawm 1998: viii):

... without the distinction between what is and what is not, there can be no history. Rome defeated and destroyed Carthage in the Punic Wars, not the other way round. How we assemble and interpret our chosen sample of verifiable data (which may include not only what happened but what people thought about it) is another matter.... [R]elativism will not do in history any more than in law courts. Whether the accused in a murder trial is or is not guilty depends on the assessment of old-fashioned positivist evidence, if such evidence is available. Any innocent readers who find themselves in the dock will do well to appeal to it. It is the lawyers for the guilty ones who fall back on postmodern lines of defence (Hobsbawm 1998: ix).

Richard J. Evan put it with greater subtlety: 'Just because we can never attain the whole or absolute truth, just because we make mistakes in our search for the truth about the past, just because there will always be something new to say about any historical subject, it does not mean that there is no such things as the truth at all' (Evans n.d.: 312).

History is difficult enough to practice without being waylaid by false trails and by subterfuges. I cannot get it completely right but I neither am in the business of getting it wrong. I take care not to make mistakes, although I inevitably do from time to time; and I certainly do not accept the proposition that because something gets left out, then the rest is fiction. One could argue indefinitely about such things.

I am certainly not saying that there is invariably a sharp and unequivocal divide between 'fact' and 'fiction'. The boundary between the two should not be conceptualised as a thin line but, rather, as a broad band in which resides degrees of uncertainty. It should also be mentioned that historians exercise an 'inventive faculty' but in a different way to a novelist: the processes of selection and interpretation are clearly 'inventive in the sense that they require reflection and judgment, but they are not inventive in the way that fiction is when it makes up characters, events, places, and times' (Strout 1993: 155). But the fact remains that many with a background in literary criticism conflate fact and fiction and take the view that all the world's a fiction - which they patently do not do in 'real' life. Little wonder that what they practice in their professional lives was once described as 'the assessment of the once-living by the ever-dead' (Hunter 1989: 159).

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