

# FICTION OR

## *NON-FICTION? THE WRITER'S RESPONSE TO HISTORY*

Susan Varga

Fiction or non-fiction? Tonight I want to talk about the choices writers make when their subject matter is, if you like, common property – when much or all of their background material consists of facts in the public arena. These facts can be either in the recent past or already transmuted into “history”. Is the choice of fact or fiction ever as clear-cut as it at first seems? And what are some of the implications and consequences of making that choice? The differences between fiction and non-fiction are perhaps more blurred and problematic than they have ever been, as more and more writers are playing with the boundaries.

Apart from my own book, I’m going to look at the way two other controversial, books have chosen to deal with factual material. Can you possibly guess which other two books?

I will try not to be overly polemical in dealing with them, but to throw up some questions and reflections. And I am not going to be taking sides; neither of these good, flawed books requires or deserves that.

First, my own book, *Heddy and Me*, had, I suppose, three factual bases: my mother’s recollections taken down on tape, known historical fact mostly gleaned from books, and, for about half the time span covered by the book, my own memories. My choice, which I will talk more about later, was to write a non-fiction book which had elements more often but not exclusively found in novels – a strong narrative line, movement backwards and forwards in time, and a personal often introspective voice, that of the writer.

For those of you who haven’t read it, *Heddy and Me* is the story of my mother’s life (although covered in any detail only until the age of 45 or so). Heddy is a so-called ordinary woman who has been through sudden poverty as a child, the Holocaust as a young woman in hiding with two young children, and the traumas of immigration. But I wanted to do a lot more with the book than write my mother’s biography in a quasi-historical framework. Interleaved with her life is an account both



of my interviews with her and of our relationship, (thus *Heddy and Me* – to that extent the book is autobiographical), and some other themes and dimensions; the emotional repercussions of the interview process, the long-term effect of the Holocaust and immigration on our family, and related problems of conflicting identities, belongings, prejudice, and so on.

Helen Garner's book *The First Stone* is grounded in recent events, splashed all over the papers. Garner used this material, her own involvement in the affair (the letter of sympathy to the master of Ormond) her own interviews, her observations of court proceedings, her reflections and emotions. She turned this mix into a non-fiction book with a strong narrative line (herself following the trail of the story) with a flavour almost of memoir. She could have used the Ormond College incident as a taking off point for a novel loosely based on these events – a course that probably would have landed her in far less hot water. She chose instead to write her first non-fiction book.

Helen Darville's chosen material was based heavily on the history of Eastern Europe in the thirties and forties: on the forced famine in the Ukraine, and the events of the Holocaust, particularly in and around the camps in Poland. She chose to write fiction, in a, at times, heavily documentary style. She relied far more than most novels do on factual material. She read a lot of books, and I presume that she interviewed Ukrainians now living in Australia.

And just briefly, a fourth acclaimed book, *The Orchard*. It's winning awards in non-fiction categories, but really, what is it? It's autobiographical and not, factual and not, fictional (but in which parts?) reflective, picking up diverse historical themes and personages. The lines between all these elements are deliberately blurred. The readers' pleasure and frustration is in the guessing game; which bits are really about her? Who/what is made up? Modjeska has not got into trouble, because she has not put her book in any category. It is deliberately a genre-hopper, and the "facts" in it are non-controversial. Mine does something similar, but without the extra titillation of possible fiction. It is when you write something that doesn't quite fit your "genre", that spills out of the allowable boundaries, that there can be trouble. So Darville's "faction" which turns out to be really fiction, is in trouble, partly on its facts, and Garner's book on the facts of a recent case, has a little more of fiction than we first realised.

But I am here to talk to my own book. If I stray onto others, it's because these recent controversies have made me look again at my own choice in handling factual and historical material.

First, why did I choose non-fiction?

I get asked this question a lot. I never really saw it as a choice, although I did consider the advantages of both forms.



I felt there was no real choice for me, for a number of reasons.

My factual source was close, contemporary, alive, and willing. The backbone of the book was my mother's life story. She never asked me to fictionalise it. It's possible too, that one of the reasons Garner chose not to fictionalise is that the events were too close both in time and to her personally (the letter of sympathy which lost her the novelist's usual camouflage, the emotions it raised about her own life) to make fiction profitable for her in this case. And it is possible that Darville's book chose fiction for the obverse; if the characters and facts in it had indeed been as close to her as many presumed, would a work of fiction have been the result? But more on that later.

I also chose non-fiction because at least part of my mother's life had a natural drama and forward momentum. To my mind, one reason to turn to fiction is when real life is too dull, or you don't have the skills to tell it as it actually happened, but need the props and devices of fiction. But as much as in fiction, a good writer of non-fiction will know where to compress, where to expand, where to dwell with loving detail, where to skate. For example, the only time in *Heddy and Me* that I gave an almost week-by-week time scale is for the eighteen months or so when my mother's and sister's and my own life was in mortal danger, when the reader wants and needs to know as near to everything that happened as is possible. It is also the time that history's grip is most feverish, when terrible events on the largest scale have us by the throat. In other parts of the book, ten years might be dismissed in a paragraph or two.

Is this distortion, or lying, or is it art? In both fiction and non-fiction there is always endless material. The selection is all. The reader will first sense whether the selection process has been one of integrity, and then whether it has been one of skill. These are fine aesthetic and moral judgments, and readers will make different ones according to the baggage they bring to a book. So some will say that Darville's "stealing" of one starving young Ukrainian woman's story only adds to the stark feeling of authenticity that at least parts of the book carry. Others will see it as proof that the book has no moral centre, as they thought all along.

Another reason for my choice of non-fiction was that I was awed by the vast historical landscape my mother's life span, stretching across two continents, from 1916 to the 1990s in Australia. Fiction or non-fiction, I had to learn about that background, assimilate it, choose what to retell, and how to interpret. I had to constantly remind myself that I was not writing a history of Hungary or of the Holocaust or of Australia in the 1950s. Extraordinary events were merely the backdrop to my mother's life, intersecting dramatically with her from time to time. Thus it seemed less intimidating to me, and infinitely more effective, I hoped, to interweave starkly factual material on the historical record,



with events on the smallest scale – one individual's fight for survival. I thought that I could use the facts, even the statistics, in a dead pan way for dramatic effect, much more easily than if I'd tried to weave the same historical facts into a work of fiction. Non-fiction gave me the ease to use other people's words, on occasion, to say for me what needed to be said. For example, I could quote Hungary's Army Chief-of-Staff during World War II, who said the following in his defence statement after the war:

The Jewish question had a catastrophic effect on the armed forces . . . a terrible corrupting effect. Every value underwent a re-evaluation. Cruelty became love for the fatherland, atrocities became acts of heroism, corruption was transformed into virtue; under such conditions, we well-thinking individuals, could not understand events. There emerged two types of discipline. One was applied to Jews against whom any action was permissible. . .

This was more effective, I thought, than any amount of rhetoric from me. It's the "other side" speaking for itself. Of course I could have invented a fictional character and put similar words into his mouth. But having chosen non-fiction, I didn't have to go to that trouble. These words had the ring of authenticity, spoken by a real, historical entity.

Some of Darville's biggest triumphs in her work of fiction come from when she interweaves her historical fact successfully, and her biggest boo-boos occur when she fails. When her history is well digested, well integrated, there are powerful passages. When the mix is crude, and the fact and fiction sit uneasily, or when she's got it wrong, the failure is embarrassing. Sometimes you'll find examples of both, cf page 75.

I think different kinds of emotional and intellectual honesty are required of the fiction and non-fiction writer. The non-fiction writer's are closer to the surface: to be as faithful as possible to the facts, to tell the story with the minimum of self deception, to preserve the integrity of your real life people, not to destroy or slander them and yet be honest in your own perceptions of them. The last is the most delicate and the most challenging, and one of the main reasons I chose non-fiction. It seemed to me dishonest to take so much from life and then give it a fictional veneer. One rationale for using fiction is that you don't hurt people if you fictionalise. Of course you do! Worse. You change their names and hair colour, and then you can go to town. That's not fiction, that's cruelty.

Another reason for using non-fiction is that, perhaps more than in fiction, you can bring a reader incredibly close, a here-you-are-close-by-me feeling; this really happened. You can do that well with distant events as well as close ones. It's called "making history come alive". So, from *Heddy and Me*:

At the end of June, 1944, not long after Heddy left Budapest, Eichmann had completed the task he had begun only three months before. All known Jews had been cleared from the country areas and deported to the concentration camps.



Then after a few paragraphs describing what was happening in the capital, we come back to Heddy hiding in a remote village.

Little real news filtered through to the isolated and muddy village. What news did come, Heddy knew, was propaganda, with defeats not admitted to, reverses alluded to weeks after the event. There was no news of Feri, no news of Pali.

The village heard that Rumania had changed sides and joined Russia, then that a combined Rumanian and Russian force had inflicted a huge defeat on the Germans. Heddy exulted in secret. The rest of the village lived in fear. Even the staunchest anti-Nazis feared the Russians – an advancing army, any advancing army, threatened the peasant's livestock, their precious horses, carts and bridles.

Heddy waited for the Russians as for her saviours. Dreaming of their victory she dreamed of Jutka returned to her, the baby healthy again, and Feri coming home to an orderly and serene flat on Pozsonyi Rd. And she fantasised about toilets. As she crept out the back on ever colder nights and sat on the wooden plank in the stink, she said to herself, "The day will come when I again sit on a toilet that simply flushes when I pull the chain".

The understanding between writer and the reader which gives the reader that extra frisson, is, "and I'm not making it up. This is for real".

But in that too, is scope for disingenuousness, if not outright lying. The question is, when does it matter? For example, I don't mention that one of the incidents referred to in Part Four, my return to Hungary in the early 1990s, actually took place eighteen months later than the others, on my second, shorter trip. I don't mention it because it makes no difference to the reader's perception of the actual incident to know this. There is no difference in the emotional content, nothing crucial in the fact omitted. For me, time and space and tedious explanation were saved. Technically, though, I lied by omission, by telescoping time and events.

In *The First Stone*, Garner doesn't mention that six people are really one, Jenna Mead. This is crucial on two fronts. One is because of the style of the book, which is "here you are with me in the very recent past; this is how it happened". Well, it turns out, not really. The other is because of the ideological position of the book. The reader is more likely to take sides against a cohort of humourless feminists surrounding the young women in court than if there is in fact one brave and conscientious older woman. This distortion of fact has the capability of distorting the readers' relationship to the material, and eventually twisting the overall argument of the book.

But how much to blame Garner, (although blame is becoming too loaded a word to use with either of these books) and how much her publishers and advisers? Even if she were in danger of a libel action, some note at the front of the book would have alerted the reader, saved misunderstanding. Similarly, including a bibliography would have



saved Darville a lot of heartache, and acres of newsprint. But then an illusion important for both of them would have been destroyed – that Garner's is entirely a work of fact, and Darville's entirely a work of fiction.

In fiction, somewhat different, more fluid standards apply. There are no boundaries, nothing you can't say, nothing you can't make up, except perhaps what's on the historical record. Although even that is problematical. Which history book have you read? Which record have you perused? Whose oral history have you listened to? Through which political lens do you interpret what you read?

I suspect that you can be an awful, lying person with politically incorrect views, and you can write a book of great emotional truth and integrity. Your persona in life is not what it is on the page. Your persona on the page is far more considered, schematised, aware, literate, than who you are in life. It also contains parts of you that never surface in daily life – and that applies to non-fiction as well as fiction writing.

For example, Helen Darville may or may not be an anti-semite in life. The evidence is not looking good. But it is still perfectly possible for her to have written a book that is not in its essence anti-semitic. In the fiction, on the page, it is the characters who are anti-semites, and they are shown as limited, prejudiced, clearly wrong. The author's voice, i.e. the closest you can get to it, the narrator's voice, with the possible odd exception, takes no part in prejudice.

It is even possible to be an anti-semite, and hate it in yourself. Take that incredibly sophisticated book, Gregor von Rezzori's *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*. Here the narrator, who may/may not be identical with the author, avows his anti-Semitism, analyses it in himself. The overall aftertaste of the book is not anti-semitic, but a savage indictment of the phenomenon.

Darville's book is not so sophisticated, but it does try to show that evil and prejudice are not confined to the Germans, or the Ukrainians, or the Jews, the Serbs, the Khmer Rouge, or white Australians. She abhors, on every page, racial stereotyping. She spreads the evil around. She sees a world that is not split into good people and bad people but is made up of ordinary flawed people capable of evil deeds. Read for yourselves just one example, the horrific description of the massacre of the teachers by the Volksdeutch and the Ukrainians at the Marxist-Leninist school (pp 110-111).

But to return again to the writer's choices when faced with facts that are inescapably part of the story you want to tell. For me, the essential question was, how will this story be told best? I felt an enormous sense of responsibility to some of the events that had to be in the book. There was no getting around the Holocaust as part of my mother and step-father's life. It was the cause of my father's death. I would rather not have written about it; there is an enormous literature



already, much of it stuff that you would rather not read, let alone write. My solution was to talk of the Holocaust as it impinged on one life, while at the same time sketching in what was happening to hundreds of thousands of other lives in that less well known arena of the carnage, Hungary.

I felt no need, no desire to fictionalise. Fictionalising an all too awful reality would have only made my problems with history more complex.

As it turns out, Helen Darville had to fictionalise. If we are to believe that she is in fact purely English, with no hint of Ukrainian in her background, she was not close enough to her subject matter to have any real choice. She researched and read, and made up, from various sources, characters to carry a story.

But even before the shock-horror revelations, I always assumed that, just as Darville says in her disclaimer at the beginning of the book, there are no counterparts to the Kovalenko family in reality. Just think about it. If your own father or uncle were indeed a war criminal of the ilk of the Vitaly character, could you write a piece of fiction about something so horribly close, so utterly real? I suppose you could. For some, it would be the only way. But would you do it when you have barely turned 20 and it is all so very close in time and war crimes trials are a real possibility? Would you at the least fictionalise far more heavily? Would you be more likely to write nothing at all?

Perhaps this is one of the reasons Darville promoted the book as a work of fiction – to give that extra frisson, that extra edge of authenticity. I, Helen, got it from the horse's mouth. Perhaps it is for a similar reason that Helen Garner never let on that she split Jenna Mead into six different women. Acceptable, of course, in fiction, not acceptable in non-fiction. The question is, why are many of us prepared to forgive Helen Garner for this rather major whopper in a book of fact, when we are not prepared to forgive Helen Darville for some factual slips in a work of fiction?

When I mention factual slips here, by the way, I am not talking of the allegations by some of Darville's critics that her historical thesis is the vicious lie that all Bolsheviks were Jews and all Jews were Bolsheviks and that Jewish Bolsheviks caused the Ukrainian famine. The author's voice does not say that; you can only jump to that conclusion on the crudest possible reading of the book. The characters do say it, repeatedly. But anyone who has spent time in Eastern Europe and has heard the latest versions of the deep-seated anti-semitism that resides there, will recognise that Darville is merely recording a common popularly held anti-semitic dogma.

I suspect that one of the reasons some of us are prepared to forgive one Helen and not another, is to do with the havoc both play with our deepest emotions. Garner collides head on with sex, how to



handle it, what it means in our lives. Darville's book is about brutality, and how we handle it in ourselves. In Garner, sex is everywhere, an uncontrollable, unlegislatabe force. In Darville's world, we are all teetering, not just "drunken Ukrainians" and "evil Germans", on the edge of brutality.

Perhaps then, it is not so much whether a writer chooses fact or fiction, but the material itself and the sensibility we bring to it. Darville has chosen the largest, most public theme of the 20th Century, the nature of publicly committed evil. She has not written a history book, or an analytic work. She has chosen to tell the story of some of the perpetrators, and she has dared to give them human characteristics, life, loves, babies, friendships.

When I first read Darville's book, well over a year ago, before any controversy, I thought it a good companion piece to my own. I still think so.

Despite the fiction/non-fiction divide, which as I've tried to show, can be pretty thin, I think comparisons can be made between the two books.

I hope that one thing I achieved with *Heddy and Me* was to make all those numbed by the statistics of the death camps care once more and in a different way about the fate of millions because they were there with, caring about, one woman and her two small children. I believe that any sane reading of Darville's book serves a similar purpose. If we get to know, and heaven preserve us, even like some parts of *Kateryna and Vitaly*, it only throws into relief the horror of their deeds.

Because it is as important that we see an individual face for the perpetrator as for the victim. The perpetrators were not few. They were many, thousands, hundreds of thousands in their varying degrees of complicity. They were, potentially you and I.

In Darville's book, Magda, Vitaly's Polish girlfriend says: "The camp was a shameful place. But it did bring prosperity to our village, and you shouldn't complain about prosperity, or you get the opposite, you know – the Evil Eye. Bad times." (P 143). Such, I suspect, was the reaction of thousands of harmless citizens across Europe who knew – something – and thought it best to do nothing. Again, on p. 125, when Magda witnesses the beating of fellow Jews by the Jewish Kapos she asks, "How Vitaly, how do they? Is it because the Kapos were poor, and the others rich?" Vitaly says, "In my village, the Kommissar was Ukrainian. He always sat before a loaded plate while we starved. We could see him through the window. It is like that."

I'd like to think that mine is a better book than Darville's. It should be. Although they are both first books, mine was written when I was in my mid forties, Darville's when she was in her early twenties. So my book should show greater consistency, maturity, better taste, more discriminating research. But hers, as befits the young, shows great



daring, great dogmatism, great imagination. If a few of her scenes are half-consciously taken from elsewhere, good luck to her. All writers assimilate and vacuum up detritus from others. As my friend the poet and playwright Jennifer Compton says, next time around she'll hopefully steal from real people, not from other writers.

You see, whatever else Helen Darville may be, or has done, she has had the courage to attempt to understand the evil-doers. She has not tried, in my view, to exonerate them. It's not enough for a Susan Varga to make us feel compassion, sympathy, identification – all comfortable emotions. If we only have compassion for and understanding of the victims, how are we to progress? It's not good enough just to see evil. Until we try to understand that evil, as *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, for all its flaws, tries to do, we are in danger of repeating the very worst things in history, over and over again.





Photo - David Karonidis

*Marcia Langton*

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